Family Values and the Peacemaker

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Family Values and the Peacemaker

by HigherMagic

Summary

Will and Hannibal are in the midst of planning their wedding when Will gets a call from his cousin, wanting to reconnect. Terrified of being discovered, of his family realizing that he's marrying Shadow Man, Will wants to refuse. They've finally managed to find peace, and happiness, and this could tear everything apart. On top of that, Alana is home from her honeymoon, and has a proposition that is going to make Will reevaluate everything he thought he knew about family, loneliness, and what it means to be happy.

Notes

A peacemaker, aside from the obvious connotation, is also a model of Colt revolver, if that gives you any clues as to how dramatic this shit is going to be :D I've been sitting on this sequel for a long time and finally got the brainspace to make it happen!

I'll be honest, I'm not sure how often updates are going to be. I have an outline (shocker) but I'm also starting a new job soon and so I anticipate a drastic slowing in posting /she says, knowing that has never stopped her ever.

I hope you guys like it! Enjoy!

Chapter 1

When Will lived in Wolf Trap, watching the seasons change as summer submitted to autumn's reign was one of his favorite pastimes. There is such a unique, brilliant vibrancy about the omen of death, the leaves changing and falling to create a thick blanket of color on the ground. The air, as it darkens earlier and earlier each day. The gradual disappearance of deer, of foxes, of owls, as they settled into their homes or moved on in order to seek shelter and food.

For a while it was a tradition of his to gather the leaves around his house and create a large pile for his dogs to play in. Winston and Buster, in particular, loved to chase errant leaves, the crunch of them crisp and loud when they bit at them. The two or three years before he'd finally called it in and moved, he had lost the energy and will to do it.

Now, though, now things are different. He buys a rake from the local gardening store and sets about the task of raking together all the leaves, smiling when he spots Winston and Addy trotting up around him, tails wagging at the visual memory of him performing such a task. They know it'll be time to play, soon, like they used to.

It feels, in a weird way, like another layer of healing. Will has not given much thought to his old house, his old life, for a long time, except in his interactions with Hannibal, Alana, and his stubborn refusal to think of Jack and anything related to him. Baltimore lingers like a bad smell, only gentled with recent memory of his hunt and pursuit of his mate.

The trees sit far back from his property, but the wind has blown leaves almost to the edge of the house, and so the task of raking them is an all-morning venture. Will's shoulder aches, warning him of the oncoming storm in a way the cloudless day does not. It will rain, soon, and the ground will likely flood. He pushes the toe of his boot through a clump of wet leaves and smiles.

His phone rings, calling his attention back from thoughts of dying leaves and storms, and he smiles again when he sees Hannibal's name flash across the screen. "Hey," he says, setting the rake against his shoulder and tugging off his gloves, cheek to the phone to keep it upright while his hands are occupied.

"Good afternoon, darling." Hannibal's voice is warm and soft, and Will's stomach does a happy little flip at the sound of it. It's strange: he would have thought, after so long, this fierce spark of infatuation would have mellowed, would have become the sweeter, fuller flavor of love and commitment in his chest, but being with Hannibal always feels new, every time. From the moment Will realized he was in love, as a child, his adoration for Hannibal has burned brightly in his chest – through the fights, through the insecurities, through the lonely nights. He burns, just as Hannibal said he would.

He tucks his gloves into the pocket of his jacket and takes his phone in hand again. "Are you on your way over?" he asks.

"Yes," Hannibal replies. Even as Will listens, below the soft rustle of the wind and leaves, he hears Hannibal's car door close and the engine start with a quiet rumble. "I wanted to discuss something with you, once I arrived."

Will's brow creases, and he catches his lower lip between his teeth. "Any particular flavor of something?" he asks, trying not to worry. Though there's nothing to worry about, he's sure – and certainly nothing worth worrying about that he thinks they could not overcome together.

Hannibal is smiling, Will can hear it, when he says; "Malcolm contacted me, and wanted my assistance in the preparations for the festival." Will sighs, nodding – it's less than a week away, and Will volunteered to help out on the hay rides because that promised the least amount of actual interaction with people, but both Malcolm and Deborah have been relatively silent since. "I was hoping you would want to help me."

"Oh?"

"We can discuss it in greater detail when I arrive," Hannibal says, purring the words in a way that makes Will shiver, pressing his lips together.

"Alright," Will replies, already breathless with anticipation. "I'll see you soon. Will you be hungry? I can make lunch."

Hannibal lets out a low, pleased sound. "That would be lovely, darling. Thank you. I'll see you soon."

Will nods, ending the call and pocketing his phone. He eyes the pile of leaves he's already started – it's a good attempt, though there are far more he could add before he allowed the dogs to have their fun. But he may need to go to the store and wants to have lunch ready by the time Hannibal arrives, and there are several hours' worth of work left if he wants to gather all the leaves.

He sighs, and clicks his tongue, and Winston and Addy run up to him. "Go on," he says, and gestures to the pile. "Knock yourself out."

Winston barks, tail wagging wildly, and eagerly turns on his heels and dives headfirst into the leaves, Addy close behind. Will laughs, shaking his head, and drags the rake back to the edge of his house, placing it at a lean next to where the lawnmower is. He ducks inside, shrugging off his coat, and contemplates lighting a fire – but the day is still young, and it will not be too cold when Hannibal arrives.

He goes to his fridge, and pulls out two large rainbow trout he had caught the day before. After discovering the location of the lake and making sure it was legal to fish in it, he had rekindled his practice of making lures and going fishing. There is a stream that feeds into and out of the river, and it is freshwater, and the fish had been more than happy to bite at whatever they'd offered him. Most of the townsfolk rely on the bay for their fishing, he imagines that the lake has been relatively undisturbed by predators like him.

The fish have already been gutted, their heads removed, and he lays them out on a baking tray which he never owned before he started cooking for Hannibal. His kitchen has grown

vastly in terms of capability – he is certainly not a cook of Hannibal's caliber, and he can't bake nearly as well as Deborah, but he's come a long way from the man who made box meals and frozen entrees and lived mostly off of coffee and determination.

He has some wild rice, which he takes and puts into a pot with enough water to cover and start boiling. Despite increasing ability, his stove isn't the most efficient and he knows it will take a while for the water to heat up properly.

The dog door in the back opens and Winston trots in, panting and shaking himself briskly. Will fixes him with a long look, and then rolls his eyes.

"Dick," he mutters. Winston sits and yawns at him. "Where's your sister?"

As if on cue, Addy comes in next, looking significantly cleaner than the other dog, which Will appreciates. She also doesn't shake herself off, instead choosing to lay down along the back wall and pick at her overgrown paws with her long teeth.

Will smiles, and turns his attention back to the food. He isn't sure what Hannibal wants to discuss with him, with such gravity that it warrants a warning before he even gets here – yes, Will isn't the best conversationalist, he never has been and likely never will be, but it's not like his mate to be so…careful. But Will has always tried to be adaptive, changing topics and trains of thought as often as Hannibal does, and he's sure it's nothing *serious* – if it's important to Hannibal, important enough to set aside specific pieces of their time together to talk about, then it's important to Will. Hannibal would do the same for him, after all.

He forces himself to focus on the task at hand – preparing lunch. He covers each side of the fish with rosemary, thyme, and lemon juice, and washes his hands as he waits for the oven to preheat.

His phone rings, in the other room, and, frowning, he goes to answer it. It's a number he doesn't recognize, but he vaguely remembers the Louisiana area code, and tilts his head, answering the phone. "Will Graham," he says.

"Hey, short-stop!" Will blinks in surprise. It's Chris – Will's cousin, who Will had stayed with, along with Chris' father, after his own father had died. They haven't really spoken in years aside from exchanging Christmas cards and the kinds of gifts people give when they don't really know what the other person likes, like cologne and flower arrangements and coupons for whiskey tasting.

Will still remembers how it felt to have his first shot of Fireball, sat by his drunken, black-eyed and split-lipped cousin on his little bed, and he hopes Chris' tastes have improved somewhat.

"Um. Hey," Will says, clearing his throat and remembering himself just a beat after the silence stretches on too long. "Chris. Wow. It's been a while."

"Too long, my man, way too long," Chris replies, with the casual drawl that would suggest they're a lot closer than they actually are. Even when Will lived with them, their age

difference and relatively late involvement as pseudo-brothers meant they led very separate lives. "Hey, what are you doin' weekend after next?"

Will's brow creases. "Um. Nothing that I know of. Why?"

"Well y'see, this sweet-sounding lady called me up last night, right? Said she was a friend of yours and was telling me all this *super* interesting stuff, like how you're apparently getting married and I thought 'Gee, that's kind of weird. Seems like the kind of thing me'n'my dad would'a been told about', you know?"

Will winces, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck, and, silently, pushes a curse to the back of his teeth. "Oh." He clears his throat. "Well, yeah, that's true. I mean, about a wedding. But we don't even have a date yet – I was going to send out invitations when we did." Which isn't entirely untrue. Will and Hannibal haven't set a date – or rather, if there is a date, Will is blissfully unaware of it, because Hannibal knows the idea of planning something like this makes him want to behave in a way certainly unfit for polite company.

"Mhm." Chris' tone isn't exactly convinced, but he's enthusiastic enough when he brushes past it. "Well, not exactly my point. You're getting married, and I don't even know the lucky lady's name!"

Will swallows. "His name is Hannibal," he says.

"*Oh*." Chris is silent for a beat, then crows with laughter. "Damn, that Omega must have you whipped, man! Not satisfied with just mating, huh?" Will swallows, harshly, but doesn't have the stomach to correct Chris twice – he's been pretty lucky so far, with the Harrogate townsfolk and Hannibal's friends, but he knows that's because Hannibal's friends respect him too much to judge him for mating with an Alpha, and Harrogate loves Will too much for the light and relief he's brought to the town.

Louisiana, and those raised within it? Worlds apart. And that's nothing to speak of his and Hannibal's *particular* history. God, if his uncle David figured out Hannibal had been the one sending letters all those years…

"I happened to ask him," he says, somewhat curtly. "So he'd have my name."

Chris is grinning, Will can hear it; "That's my boy." He laughs again. "Well! You thank your lady friend for giving me your number, and I expect a call *very* soon because we need to meet this new mate of yours. I bet he's pretty – is he pretty?"

"He's beautiful," Will breathes, because he can't help himself.

Chris laughs, and Will can see him now – or, at least, see him at seventeen, brazen and cocky and the kind of white knight Alpha Will aspired to be, or aspired to be with. He can't honestly say he managed either, but that's alright – things change, expectations and reality flows with it, and Will is happy. In the background, he can hear a child, a pair of high-pitched shrieks and then laughter. "Hey, maybe we'll all come up, or you can come down," Chris suggests, his tone gentler now – no longer the teasing older cousin, picking on a kid, but someone soft-

eyed and gentle-tongued. He's probably looking at his family right now, the same red glow in his eyes most loving Alphas have when looking at their pack.

The same pride Hannibal shows, when he looks at Will.

Unbidden, Will smiles. The beep of the oven as it reaches the right temperature grabs his attention, and he heads to the kitchen. "Sounds great, Chris, really. I'd love to get together sometime. I have to go, but I'll text you later?"

"Alright, shrimp," Chris says warmly.

Will rolls his eyes. "I'm thirty-six, man," he grumbles.

"Still a shrimp, unless you got jacked in the last few years," Chris says with another laugh. "Talk to you later. Be safe."

Will nods, and hangs up, pocketing his phone. He slides the fish into the oven and checks the rice, sighing when he only sees the beginning of little bubbles rising to the surface. He folds his arms across his chest, leaning against the counter, and takes out his phone again.

He pulls up Alana's number and types; "I am literally going to kill you."

He doesn't have to wait long. His phone rings within three minutes, and Will grins, answering the call. "You're so dead," he tells her.

"You get one shot, pretty boy," Alana replies, laughing. "What'd I do this time?"

"You called my cousins!" Will says. "First of all, I didn't even know you were back in the States yet – so that's one reason I'm gonna kill you. Secondly, you called my family whom I haven't spoken to for *years* and told them I'm getting married – strike two. Honestly, the only reason I *might* let you live is because you didn't spill the beans about Hannibal being an Alpha."

"Okay, drama queen, first off," Alana says, but she's grinning. "I am *not* back in the States yet. Margot and I are still in Paris. We're flying back tomorrow. *Secondly*, I didn't call anyone."

Will frowns. Hesitates. "Did…Margot, then?" he asks, suddenly unsure. "Chris said it was a woman who called."

"Well, given that she's been passed out for the last few hours after I kept her up all night, I sincerely doubt it," Alana replies with a hum.

Will's frown deepens, because the only people who know this cell phone number are Hannibal, Alana – and, after the conference debacle, Jack. So unless Jack spilled somewhere, or Hannibal did -.

Hannibal.

Will sighs, and closes his eyes. "Of course he did," he mutters, and then lifts his gaze to the ceiling. "Alright. I'm sorry I accused you, and I'll tell the snipers to stand down."

"How gracious," Alana replies playfully. "Though, while I have you on the phone and run up your bill, do you think you could come pick me up from the airport tomorrow? I have some fancy shit I wanna give to you and I'm too lazy to haul it all myself, plus a mini roadtrip with you sounds way more fun than a taxi."

"No Margot?" Will asks. "I think Hannibal would insist on having you both over for dinner, if he knew we were hanging out."

"Mm, nope! Just you and me. I insist," Alana says, and Will knows that tone of voice. It's the same one she had every time she brought up the subject of setting him up on a blind date, the same one she'd used when Will agreed to dinner with Hannibal all that time ago.

His eyes narrow. "What are you scheming?" he asks.

"Scheming? I don't scheme, *you* scheme. I just wanna hang out with my friend for a while! No mates or wives or husbands or anything. Isn't that reason enough?"

"Now I'm really suspicious," Will says, smiling.

"You are the *worst*. Are you going to pick me up or not?"

"Sure. Text me the flight details and I'll come get you." He has missed her terribly, after all, and she's been gone for almost a whole year which is a ridiculous amount of time for a honeymoon and far too long for Will not to have seen his best friend. "Now I'm gonna hang up on you and finish making lunch. Enjoy the rest of Paris."

"Thanks, Will. Bye!" And then she hangs up and Will sets his phone down, shaking his head. Sometimes it was a wonder he got anything done with so many people coming in and out of his life. They waded in and out of his stream of consciousness like bears, waiting to pick at his leaping, frantic thoughts as they tried desperately to swim upstream. Not all of them made it.

He thinks to what Chris had said, and Alana had said. If Hannibal was the one who reached out to Will's family, he had a female accomplice help him. Will is sure there's no shortage of women he could have asked – maybe Alice, the starry-eyed youth who's studying abnormal Alpha psychology under his mentorship. Like he did with Alana. Maybe Bedelia, with her haughty air and arched brows. Maybe Diane Komeda, with her gummy-wide smile and pleasant eagerness, and her continued invitations for Will to join Hannibal at the Opera so that they might socialize more.

There is no shortage, and honestly the accomplice matters less than the action itself, because Hannibal, of course, knows exactly how to reach Will's family. Will would be foolish to think he would stop keeping tabs on those people just because Will no longer saw them. He probably knows their names – even Chris' kids, which is more than Will can say – their addresses, their phone numbers. Their daily routines, everything about them.

He also knows exactly how stupid and reckless it would be to get in touch with Will's uncle, to jeopardize their secrecy. He did, after all, start leaving letters in Will's locker instead of under the potted plant. He knew David was watching Will, and that detective too, when Will was a kid. He would know exactly how he'd look, if his true identity were revealed.

Will's knuckles curl up tightly, and he clenches his jaw. *Why* would Hannibal want such a thing? It makes no sense to Will, in the same way digging up old hurts make no sense. There's no reason for David or Chris to know much about Will's life aside from the simple fact that he is alive.

Perhaps that's being selfish, though, building up another wall of iron and stone to defend this secret place he has carved out for Hannibal and himself. Will's jealousy may have been curbed, his possessive instincts settled until they were background radiation, but the idea of yet *more* people infringing on his bubble of happiness sets his teeth on edge.

The food is done by the time Hannibal arrives, and Will breathes out, trying to calm himself down from the rolling mess his thoughts have taken, like a beehive, buzzing and alive in his skull. He plates the fish and rice and Winston and Addy rise when Hannibal enters, trotting over to him to say 'Hello'. Will listens as he sheds his coat and greets the dogs, before the front door opens to let them outside, and the doorway darkens with Shadow Man's silhouette.

Will smiles as Hannibal approaches him, sighs and closes his eyes as Hannibal settles his hands on Will's hips, his teeth to Will's neck. "Hello, darling," he purrs, and Will shivers, shows his neck and opens his eyes just wide enough to see so he can turn off the oven.

Hannibal kisses him over the mating mark, nails digging in and pulling Will back against him, and Will shivers again, bites his lower lip and turns his head for a kiss. "Hey," he breathes. Hannibal's purr is soft and rumbling against his back and Will lets them stand there for a moment, soaking in each other's scents. Hannibal's presence is incredible, as always, and warms Will down to his fingertips as Hannibal kisses his scruffy cheek. "You're just in time."

Hannibal smiles, and lets Will go. "Excellent. I've brought another selection for you to try. If it meets your approval, I was thinking of sharing more of it with the rest of the adults during the festival." Will arches a brow, and nods, and follows Hannibal with their food and forks. They sit at Will's little dining room table and Hannibal pulls a bottle of wine from his bag, uncaps it and rises for two glasses. Will grabs the bottle and brings it to his nose, smells something crisp.

Hannibal returns and pours them a glass each, and Will smiles at him, taking his as his mate settles. The wine is a subtly golden color, and looks more like mead, and is thick when he takes a sip. He hums, brow creasing as he tries to place the flavor.

"It's…lemony," he hazards, and Hannibal nods. "Honey?"

"A blend of both," Hannibal replies, warm and proud. He takes a drink of his own, wets his lips and considers his glass when he's done. "The aniseed isn't as strong a flavor as I'd feared."

Will hums. "I like it," he says, and Hannibal smiles. That warm smile that feels like it's just for Will.

"I'm glad," he purrs, and sets his glass down to take a bite of rice. Will watches him, and he's sure this is the way Hannibal feels when he gives Will wine to try – wanting, desperately, for his offering to be accepted and liked. Hannibal takes a bite of the fish as well, and lets out a pleased sound, and Will sighs, warm and happy to see Hannibal eagerly eat his offering.

They sit in companionable silence for a while, and then Will clears his throat, and says, "What did you want to talk about?"

Hannibal pauses, and sighs. "A misstep on my part, unfortunately," he replies, and Will frowns. "I made the mistake of mentioning feeling somewhat overwhelmed with planning our wedding, on top of everything else. I had intended to wait for Alana's return before tackling the task with any real focus, but Diane and Bedelia and I were at lunch yesterday, and before I could stop her, Diane had your cousin on the line."

Will frowns.

"She has taken it upon herself to handle the guest list," Hannibal says, and Will can give him credit – he does look apologetic enough. And Will remembers, suddenly, that Diane also has his phone number, since she would not let Will out of her sight before getting it the last time Will was over at one of Hannibal's dinner parties.

He clears his throat. "Chris called me," he says. Hannibal's eyes snap up, and he nods. "Just a little after you did. Today."

Hannibal sighs. "I'm sorry, darling. If I'd known her intentions, I would have been more careful."

"I'm not angry," Will says. It had been good to hear from Chris, after all. Chris had been the one to solve the rainbow riddle for him – had it not been for Chris, so much might have been different. He might have disappointed Hannibal far, far earlier.

Hannibal nods, and Will's head tilts. "But you're not angry either, are you?" he asks. Hannibal hums, and takes another drink. "You like the idea of me reconnecting with my family."

Hannibal's mouth twitches into a smile. "An idea you find…undesirable?"

"It's not…" Will shakes his head, sighs, and rests an elbow on the table. "I think it's a monumentally stupid idea." Hannibal's head tilts. "Hannibal, they fuckin'…. My uncle, and my cousin, they *know* about you. About your history. Or at least they know who Shadow Man is. *Not* to mention the fact that I grew up in the Goddamn Bible belt where being…like I am, and being like you are…"

Hannibal regards him for a long, long moment, before he straightens and takes another drink of wine. "Do you think they'll think lesser of you, or me, for both of us being Alphas?" he asks. Will swallows, and doesn't want to answer. "Are you more worried about them finding out what I am, or who I am? Who I was?"

"The whole damn thing," Will snaps. His teeth feel too sharp and he stabs another mouthful of rice to try and curb his tongue. It burns the roof of his mouth when he takes a bite and he winces, washing it down with wine. "Do you have any idea how disastrous it could be if they figured out who you are?"

Hannibal sighs. "I think I have a better idea than you do."

Will winces, and hisses, "Right. You have more to lose."

"Will." The tone of his voice stops Will in his tracks, and he growls, swallowing harshly, and takes another bite of fish. Hannibal sighs again, and reaches forward, taking Will's free hand in a gentle grip. Their fingers lace, and tighten until Will's knuckles turn white. Hannibal has his wedding ring on, the metal warm and smooth against Will's touch. "One deep regret I have is that, through our courtship, I alienated you from your family. I stole you away, maybe not physically, but I think we both knew the moment you realized I was an Alpha, you changed your behavior, and became more secretive."

Will swallows, and lifts his eyes.

"I never wanted that for you," Hannibal says, and he's sincere, Will knows he is. "I lost my family when I was very young and their absence affects me deeply, still. If I could, I would give it all back to you, even if it's just a fraction of what I took."

"I don't feel like you took them away from me," Will murmurs. It's hard to be angry when Hannibal looks at him like that, like Will hung all the stars in the sky just to please him. "You didn't. I was the one who hid everything. But when he found -."

He flinches, remembering the look of terror, of black anger on his uncle's face when he'd found Will's letters.

"They were going to take you away from me," he snarls, holding Hannibal's hand tightly, squeezing. "If he had his way he'd have ripped us apart and I can't forgive him for that. I don't know what I'd do if he tried it again, for any reason."

Hannibal nods, pressing his lips together. He lifts Will's hand and kisses his knuckles, sighing gently. "Darling," he murmurs, and shakes his head. "What can I promise that you don't already know? Nothing would separate us."

"Prison might," Will hisses. "If David knows you were writing to me when I was a kid, he could…."

"What?" Hannibal presses. "What could he do? What letters has he seen aside from two dear friends, one of whom was consoling the other through a tragic loss, where a child had a pen

pal that helped him recover from the death of his father, or simply two men who happened to fall in love?"

"You groomed me, Hannibal," Will says. "I know we don't like to think of it that way, but that's what it was. You found me when I wasn't even a person yet and now, I'm marrying you. That looks *bad*."

"Then we shall keep that part a secret," Hannibal replies, as if it's that easy.

Will shakes his head. "He'll remember," he says, and takes his hand away to run it through his hair. "You'll…something will happen. You'll call me 'darling' or he'll see your handwriting and he'll remember."

"I'll hire a calligrapher for the invitations," Hannibal says with a wave of his hand. "And I'm sure I can behave well enough around him not to slip up." He smiles, a sly expression that Will can't help return. "I've been told I'm quite good at maintaining a certain level of decorum."

Will laughs, though it's a tight sound. He looks down at his food, half-eaten, and then the wine. He sighs. "I want them to know," he confesses. "I wish everyone could know." He looks down at his hands, his own wedding ring shining in the light streaming in from outside. They will take them off and give them again during the ceremony, or so Will assumes. "I don't want to hide anymore. I don't want to…burn out again."

"And I won't let you, my daydreamer," Hannibal murmurs. Will looks up and meets his eyes, lets the heat there soak into him and warm his chest, loosening the knot. "But I think, to do that, you should invite your family up here. It would be good for you."

Will rolls his eyes. "Right."

"I am sorry that it happened this way," Hannibal adds. "Diane is a persistent creature." Will huffs, and nods – he knows that well enough by now. "But she cares about you very deeply, and none of my friends know our particular history either. The only people we will have to worry about is ourselves, and I think we can handle a week or so."

"A *week*?" Will repeats.

Hannibal lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "They may be able to help with setting everything up. Besides, it will be good to catch up with them, and discern if their fellowship is even something you want."

Will sighs, and swallows. "I suppose," he relents, and takes another bite of food, washing it down with wine. It really is very good, and he licks his lips to chase the flavor. "Chris suggested he come visit next weekend, or I go down there. He wants to meet you."

Hannibal smiles. "So am I to guess right in assuming he thinks I'm a woman? Or an Omega?"

"I think he thinks you'll be Omega," Will replies with another heavy sigh. His head hurts, and he turns his wrist, rubbing the old marks against the edge of the table. Hannibal reaches out

immediately to stop him doing it and Will winces, flexes his fingers in thanks, and takes his fork in hand again once Hannibal releases him. "I don't…. Chris is alright. At least I never got the impression he was homophobic." Nor his uncle, for that matter, but children don't notice that kind of prejudice unless shown examples and for all his observation of the world, Will made it very hard for him and his family to see eye to eye. He turned his back on that kind of wisdom to soak in the knowledge of the world, because that's what Shadow Man wanted, and by the time he was old enough to feel shame for his desires, it was far too late to find solace and safety with his family.

He sighs again, and nudges his plate with his knuckles, appetite forgotten. "I'm sorry," he says, and Hannibal tilts his head. "I didn't mean to get so worked up about it."

"Family is important to you," Hannibal replies with a nod. "Or, rather, your selection of it has caused a great impact." Will huffs, but can't deny it. "I would like to ask, Will – assuming everything goes in our favor, that your uncle and cousin and all his family are accepting and happy for us, would you be interested in pursuing a more constant connection with them?"

Will frowns. His knuckles tap against the bottom of his table and he sinks a canine into his lower lip, thinking the question over. Finally, he says, "I don't know." And it's an honest answer. "I'm sorry, Hannibal, I guess I just don't feel as connected to them as you want me to feel. Whether that's your fault or not, it doesn't matter. For a long time, it was just me and my dad, and then it was just Daydreamer and Shadow Man. The only exception I can think of is Alana, and I love her to death, but…" He shrugs.

Hannibal considers this, for far longer than Will would think necessary, before he nods to himself and looks down at his food, finishing the last of the rice with another bite. He sits back with a contented sigh, and Will stands, appetite gone, and begins clearing the plates.

Hannibal follows him back to the kitchen, watches Will wrap his leftover food and put it away, placing the dishes in the sink to be washed later, and, with another soft sigh, Will turns to him and presses close to his chest, smiling as Hannibal embraces him and starts to purr.

"I feel as though we're dangerously close to the subject of loneliness again," Will murmurs.

Hannibal's purr stops, and he pets a hand through Will's wild hair, down to the nape of his neck, and sighs. "I was very close to my sister, when we were young, before I lost her," he confesses in a quiet whisper. "After that time, I spent most of my youth being in some state of isolation. I longed to connect with someone, the way I connected, eventually, with you." He sighs again. "I suppose I'm projecting."

Will nods. "The difference is that I never had to be lonely that way," he replies, and lifts his head so he can see Hannibal's face. "I've always had you. As far back as I can remember it mattering."

Hannibal's lips twitch in a small smile, and he leans down, cupping Will's face and kissing him, the metal of his wedding ring warm on Will's jaw. "I'm glad."

"You're all I need," Will murmurs. "I'll I've ever needed. But if it'll make you happy, I can try." Hannibal blinks at him, head tilting. "I'll try and make friendly, welcome my family back

into my life, build up a relationship with them again. I can't promise anything, but I'll try."

"That's all I ask," Hannibal purrs, his eyes bright with anticipation and victory. Will rolls his eyes, tilts his head up for another kiss, and pulls back when his phone chimes. He fishes it out of his pocket, sees it's a text from Alana, listing her flight details, and winces at the arrival time.

Hannibal lets out a quiet, curious sound, nosing at Will's hair.

"Alana wants me to pick her up from the airport tomorrow," he explains, going back to the dining table and taking his glass, finishing the wine in another swallow, and smiles when Hannibal pours him another. "She was very insistent that we get to spend some time together, just us."

Hannibal's brows lift, and he says what Will is thinking; "Sounds like she's planning something."

"Can't imagine it's anything wedding-related," Will says, and takes his refilled glass. "And she's usually only this cagey about something to do with my love life, which isn't exactly a relaxing thought."

Hannibal laughs. "Perhaps she met someone in France that she thinks is far more suited to you than I am."

Even though Will knows he's joking, he snarls at the thought, putting his phone down on the table. "I think one pretentious European is enough for me."

"Pretentious?"

"Mm. Insufferable."

"You poor thing."

Will grins at him, sets his glass down and takes Hannibal in his arms, kissing lightly at his neck. "I have to be at the airport at like five in the morning," he complains – he's never exactly needed a lot of sleep, but falling asleep with Hannibal is comfortable, makes him feel safe and secure, and he sleeps so much better when Hannibal is with him. "And she said she wanted to hang out here."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to risk her wrath," Hannibal says to his hair, light and teasing. "I'm sure I can entertain myself – I'll spend the day with Malcolm and Deborah, planning the festival."

Will nods, and then frowns. "Didn't you say you wanted to talk to me about that? Help plan or whatever?"

Hannibal hums. "Yes," he purrs, "but now, knowing our compressed schedule, I would much rather simply enjoy my mate's company." Will smiles, leans up and nuzzles his clean-shaven jaw, rubbing their cheeks together like wolves. Hannibal smiles, and tucks a lock of hair behind his ear. "Unless, of course, he has any objections."

"I think you'll find he's more than happy to just relax with you," Will replies with a grin, and tilts his head up for another kiss. He sighs, wrapping his fingers around Hannibal's wrists, and tugs him towards the couch.

It is at three in the fucking morning, still stiff and sore from taking Hannibal's knot, that Will is woken as his alarm goes off, rousing the dogs and Hannibal as he groans, pawing at his damn phone, and huffs a breath into his pillow. Hannibal sighs, pressing up behind him, nuzzling and nipping at Will's freshly-bitten neck.

"Five minutes," he murmurs, and Will laughs, closing his eyes as Hannibal's warm hands spread down his flanks, tugging him back.

"If you want to do what I think you want to do, I'll be really late," he complains, though it's a paltry concern at best.

Hannibal's teeth edge along his neck, and he lets out a soft purr, rutting almost idly at Will's bare flesh. "She's coming from Europe," he murmurs. "Even if the lines are quick, customs and baggage claim will take another half an hour, at least."

"Hannibal," Will growls, mock-scolding. He laughs when his mate merely purrs. "I don't know if I'm a bad influence on you or you're a worse one on me."

"Let's agree to worsen each other, then," Hannibal purrs, and slides a hand to Will's belly, pulling him back until his hardening cock ruts between the slick that leaked from Will during the night. "Come, darling – my scent isn't embedded in you yet."

Will shivers, but gives no sound of protest as he bends on knee, presses it to the mattress and turns onto his belly, just enough for Hannibal to rise up and cover him, shoving him down onto the bed. He sighs, claws flexing in the sheets as Hannibal ruts against him, testing to see if Will gives any more signs of protest. When he receives none, his jaws open on Will's neck and he tightens his hands in Will's hips, keeping him still and spread out as he rolls his hips, cockhead pressing to Will's swollen, sore hole, and pushes back inside.

"*Fuck*," Will breathes, stomach tensing and shoulders rolling as Hannibal sinks into him. He trembles beneath his mate, tilts his head and bares his throat as Hannibal starts up a slow, tender rhythm inside him, pushing in all the way and then pulling back until Will's body tightens, wanting him to remain. He lifts a hand, pawing at Hannibal's mussed hair, groans as Hannibal fucks into him again – still slow, so gentle, like Will is something precious and delicate in his arms.

Will makes another weak sound, when Hannibal's hand slides between his belly and the mattress, wraps around his cock and starts to stroke him, long and slow. Hannibal huffs a laugh. "Perhaps we will have to restrain more than our terms of endearment, when we have guests," he says, sounding delighted by that. "You are a vocal creature, my love."

"You're no better," Will snaps, gasping again as Hannibal snarls, as though to prove his point. He grinds his teeth together, lifting his hips, seeking more friction, behind him and below him. "I swear, sometimes it sounds like you're in rut, the way you fuck me."

Hannibal stills – only for a moment, but enough that Will notices. Of course; he has always been especially tuned to his mate, from the second he saw him and knew who he was. Will knows what it's like to be in rut – remembers as though it was yesterday, the aching need and the rabid desire Hannibal alone can conjure in him. He would love Hannibal no matter what gender he was, but there is a particular sweetness to imagining him slick and wet – or maybe Will, with his Alpha covering him and fucking him fertile.

Hannibal growls, and does not answer, but tightens his hand on Will's cock as he sinks in again, the pressure of his knot already forming. He kisses Will's sweaty neck, bites his nape and goes still with another growl, forcing his knot in, rutting to make it swell and lock, and Will whines, arching his back, fucking into Hannibal's fist and then back onto his knot as his mate ties him. He's not going anywhere, even if he wanted to.

"Oh, Will," he breathes, and noses at the newest bite – gentler, this time, far more polite, and Will shivers, biting his lower lip as Hannibal twists his wrist, tightens his hand at the head of Will's cock, and makes Will bear his weight as his other hand sinks in, working at the loose patch of skin at the base where Will would swell if he was inside someone.

Will clenches up, coming with another whimper against the pillows as Hannibal works him onto his knot, then forward. Hannibal's fingers tighten around the little swell of Will's knot, adding pressure, tugging at it as Will finishes onto the sheets, and Hannibal's purr is loud as he nuzzles Will's hair, both of them panting as they recover.

Hannibal sighs, content and pleased, and presses an elbow to the bed so he isn't crushing Will anymore, licking and sucking light pink marks to his neck. Will closes his eyes, shows more of his throat to let Hannibal do as he pleases, and when Hannibal's knot goes down, he pushes himself to his elbows and knees, wincing at the protest of sore muscles, and checks the time on his phone.

"Great, I'll only be twenty minutes late," he says, with a playful smile as Hannibal collapses on his back. Hannibal runs a hand through his hair, grinning, and looks more pleased with himself than anything else. Will prowls over him, leans down and noses at his mouth until his lips part, allowing a deep kiss. "Can you take care of the dogs' breakfast?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies, petting through his hair. Will nods, and rises, going to the shower. When he's clean and dressed, he finds Hannibal downstairs, washing the dishes they ended up abandoning last night while Winston and Addy nudge curiously at his thighs. Will smiles, kisses him, and pets down his back.

"You better be gone by the time we get back," he warns with another playful smile. "Alana isn't a woman I'd dare cross."

"Nor I," Hannibal says. He turns his head, asking silently for one more kiss, which Will is eager to grant him. "Drive safely, darling, and give Alana my best."

"I will." He shoulders his coat, patting himself down for keys, phone, and wallet, and dons his shoes, leaving with one last backward glance to see Hannibal finishing with the dishes, drying his hands, and bending down to retrieve Winston and Addy's food from the sealed bag beneath the sink.

By the time Will gets to Baltimore International, the sky is just starting to turn pink with dawn, though the sun hasn't risen yet. He parks in short-term and walks into the arrivals lounge, settling down to wait by the entrance to the customs gate until Alana shows up. She doesn't keep him waiting long, and he vows to never tell Hannibal about the excellent timing. He rises with a smile, greeting her as she abandons her luggage cart and runs over to him, throwing herself into his arms.

"Hi!" she chirps, and gives him a big kiss on the cheek. Will laughs, makes a show of wiping his face as she rolls her eyes, and takes her cart from her, pushing it towards the door to the car park. "Thanks so much for doing this!"

"Where's Margot?" Will asks.

"She had to fly straight from here to New York. I guess the Verger expansion is going to include some places upstate, she had to go make nice with a bunch of old balding white men and pretend to nod along and agree with whatever they say."

"And you didn't want to go?" Will asks flatly. "I'm shocked."

She hits his arm in a playful slap, and he grins at her, stopping only by the little kiosk to pay for parking before they continue on.

"You hungry?" he asks, once they stop at his car and she helps him load her bags into the trunk – she packed a fucking house-full, he swears, though a year's trip, he supposes, warrants a lot of luggage. She tucks the cart into a nearby retrieval spot and gets in his car, shivering until he cranks up the heat. "There's a *Wendy's* by the exit. Good ol' American food."

She rolls her eyes. "I changed my mind. Take me back," she says, grinning when he laughs, and drives out of the parking lot and onto the connection road that feeds into the highway. "But I think I could actually kill for some fries. So, yeah, onward, cap-i-tan!"

Will obeys with a nod, going through the drive-thru, and she spends most of the trip back to Harrogate stuffing her face in a very unladylike fashion, occasionally feeding Will fries, and tells him about her trip. Her and Margot's long drives through Germany and Austria. The Fallas festival they saw in Spain. The walks and biking paths they took along the Seine. The museums, the architecture, promising to show him pictures when she gets them developed.

"You used disposable cameras?"

"My memory card got full and I didn't bring my laptop, and I wasn't going to buy a new memory card, I lose them all the time!"

"You could *buy* a new laptop."

"Hey! Just because I married an heiress doesn't mean I'm gonna start being stupid with money."

"I think that's the only legitimate reason to start being stupid with money."

She tells him about the winter months they spent skiing and cozied up in the winter lodge, up in the Alps. The late-summer wine tastings and all the biergartens. The midnight talks on balconies in cities Will has never dreamed of going, the cottages they rented where it felt like they were the only two people in the world.

That, at least, Will can relate to. "Sounds like it was an awesome trip."

"It was," she replies, sighing, and then shoots him a grin. "Don't worry, I got you and Hannibal all kinds of presents. One of those suitcases is pretty much all stuff for you."

"Alana," he murmurs, shaking his head.

"I'm allowed to spoil my friends!" she says, and slaps his arm again. "Besides, when you and Hannibal go on your honeymoon I expect *all* the presents when you get back."

Will winces. "I don’t know if we'll end up going anywhere," he says. Sure, venturing off to some unknown land and spending time together sounds nice, but it also sounds like there would be a lot of people, maybe a language he didn't know, and what sight in the world could possibly make him feel the same as simply being with Hannibal does, listening to him play piano, tasting his wine, feeling him warm and solid in Will's arms? He's sure there's nothing like it, and to pretend there is would be like telling himself a lie.

"*Well*," Alana says with a hum, as Will turns the last corner and pulls up outside his house. Hannibal's car is gone, and Will sighs, swallowing back his wistfulness, knowing his mate won't be home when they go in. They leave Alana's luggage in the car and traipse inside, and settle with coffee and water at the dining room table. Winston and Addy greet Alana with woofs of recognition, nose at her briefly, and then go to the dog beds in front of the fireplace once Will lights it. "You're going to want some time to yourself, I'm sure."

Will's head tilts.

"Before, you know, kids. House in the suburbs. The whole nine."

Will winces again, and tries to cover it with a laugh. "Not to take you back to high school biology, but two Alphas can't make a baby."

Alana rolls her eyes. "I *know* that. I meant *my* kids. I'm not going to let their Godfather be a hermit! You'll have to see them, and visit, won't you?"

Will blinks at her. "Of course I will," he murmurs, and she grins at him, before he adds; "Wait. Since when are you having kids?"

"Well, I mean…" She shrugs one shoulder, drums her nails against her coffee mug, and purposely doesn't meet Will's eyes.

"Alana," he says, heavily. "Are you and Margot gonna adopt?"

"We've talked about it," Alana says. "But the thing is – well, you know Mason?" Will nods – Margot's brother. He's never met him, never wants to meet him if even half the shit he's heard is true. "I mean, he's so sickly, you know, he's probably not going to live much longer even with all the medicine and care he's getting. And Margot's father was very explicit in his will – only Alphas can inherit his fortune. If Mason dies and there's no Alpha heir, we lose everything."

Will frowns. "That's bullshit."

"I know," Alana says with a sigh. "Fact is, though, Mason isn't in a fit state to make *any* babies, which leaves me and Margot. If she got pregnant, or I did, and we had an Alpha, that would be legal." She rolls her eyes. "Apparently the almighty Molson Verger didn't think gay marriage would ever be legal, so he didn't think of that little loophole."

Will presses his lips together, a sharp coil of anxiousness threading around his spine. "Why are you telling me this?" he asks.

She sighs, and finally meets his eyes. "Look, Will, I'll level with you," she says, and reaches out to put her hand over his. "You're kind of in the same boat I am. When you and Hannibal die, there's no one to pick up after you. If you had a kid, they could inherit everything, take over with the dogs, the house, all that, you know?"

Will flinches, pulling his hand back. "What are you saying?"

"I'm just asking you to *consider*," Alana says, carefully, "maybe…donating. IVF, that kind of thing." She smiles, though it's strained, trying to lighten the mood; "There needs to be a kid with your hair. It's too good to die with you."

Will is frozen. The idea of children is one he hasn't thought about, hasn't mentioned, since that one stretch of time where he had been so scared of losing Hannibal, and they'd talked about having children – about how, if Will could, he would have Hannibal's kids. But this is…something else entirely.

He shakes his head, pushing himself back in his chair. "I don't -. This isn't -."

"Hey, calm down," Alana says, holding her hand up in a placative motion. "I'm not gonna strap you down and harvest your baby-making juice. It's just…something to think about, maybe. *Maybe*." She ducks her head, makes him meet her eyes and nods, once. "Just think about it. Talk about it with Hannibal, with me and Margot if you want, or go brood in silence in the woods like you usually do, I don't care how you decide. I just wanted to mention it, because I don't think there's any person in the world I'd rather be my kid's father."

Will winces again, sucks in a breath, chugs a big mouthful of his coffee even though it's still too hot, and burns his tongue. He doesn't know what to say, doesn't know what he *can* say, so he merely murmurs; "I'll think about it."

"Good," she says, straightening with a smile. "Well, now that I've totally freaked you out, it's present time! Come help me get them from the car."

She stands, and disappears through the front door with a swish of hair. After a moment, mute, Will rises, and follows.

Chapter 2

Will drives Alana home that night, glad for the silence and solitude as he makes his way back to his house, hi-beams cutting through the dark night as he drives a little above the speed limit, wanting to be back in a place that is familiar and comfortable to him. Winston and Addy greet him with tired huffs, content to remain on their beds by the unlit fireplace as he enters his home.

Hannibal's car was outside, and Will smiles when he spies his mate, sitting at their dining room table and perusing one of the tour guide books Alana brought back with her. Most of her gifts for Will had been guides and informational books on the various museums and places she had visited, which Will appreciated – he likes reading about things, soaking in knowledge, and looking at the pictures of art and statues even if he doesn't end up seeing them himself. The world is a big, open place, and while someday he might be inclined to visit it for real, reading about them sates his curiosity well enough for now.

Hannibal looks up, and smiles at him as Will sheds his coat and shoes, and approaches him. It makes sense now why his dogs didn't rush to him, demanding dinner – Hannibal must have already fed them.

He leans down when Hannibal lifts his chin, kisses him warm and chaste, and sits with a sigh on the other chair. "I trust Alana is doing well," Hannibal murmurs, closing the book and setting it down. Its title and cover depict the Alhambra – a palace rebuilt on the ruins of an old Roman fort. The picture of it, the reddish walls, shine in the low light.

Will nods. "And Malcolm, and Deborah?"

"I believe the festival is truly ready to begin, now," Hannibal replies with a smile. "They told me to send their love, and request your presence bright and early at the hay rides."

Will nods again, bites his lower lip and runs a hand through his hair. Alana's request has been sitting in the back of his skull like a huge, fat toad, croaking whenever he grows complacent, to draw his attention once again. He doesn't want to talk about it, but he knows he should – knows, also, that Hannibal will surely be able to tell something is troubling him, and it's only a matter of time before Will surrenders his secrets. He can't hide anything from Shadow Man.

"If you're free next weekend, I was thinking of going down and visiting Chris," he says. Hannibal's eyes flash, and his smile widens. "It'd be easier for us both to just fly down for a quick trip, you know? And if…it goes well, we can invite them to the wedding."

"A fine idea," Hannibal says, voice soft and warm. The table is covered with tour books and pictures of beautiful things, and yet Will knows Hannibal looks at him like Will is the better of all of them. He blushes finely under the scrutiny, shifting his weight. "Let me know when you'd like to go down; I'll arrange the flights."

Will nods. "Yeah, I'll just…check with Chris, ask him when he'd be able to get us." He huffs, and smiles, shaking his head. "Christ, I don't even know what he looks like nowadays. How

many kids he has. I want to say three but honestly I don't know."

Hannibal's head tilts. He purses his lips, drops his eyes to the book, and sits back with another soft sound.

Will regards him. "Do you know?"

"I have kept up with major events regarding your family, yes," Hannibal confesses, though he is not repentant of the fact. Of course, Will would be more surprised if he didn't know anything about them – Hannibal is not the kind of hunter to stop watching the herd just because he caught the prey he wants. "I wanted to be aware, in case anything happened to any of them. Your uncle is older than your father, and there are suggestions for genetic links for certain illnesses. If he had passed, I would want to be able to tell you."

Will sighs, wetting his lower lip when Hannibal meets his eyes again. "I'm not surprised," he says, gently. "And I'm not angry. Really."

Hannibal nods, and seems somewhat relieved despite his confidence and lack of guilt. His head tilts, and he looks Will up and down. Says, slowly; "Am I allowed to ask what it was Alana was so driven to discuss with you in private?"

Will winces. "You can ask," he says, "but I don't want to tell you. I don't want to talk about it yet." Hannibal blinks, head tilting further, and Will shifts his weight and sighs. "I need to know how I feel about it before I discuss it with you, because you might change my mind, or see something I didn't, and so I need to have a solid foundation of my own emotions and opinion before I can discuss it."

"A fair request," Hannibal says lightly, unbothered. Perhaps he simply appreciates Will's openness in admitting he can't talk about it yet – Will has tried, since the whole terrible event of his rut and his hunt of Hannibal, to be more open with how he's feeling. To communicate. He can't demand openness and transparency from his mate and then close himself off in turn.

Then, he smiles, and leans in, taking Will's hand in a gentle grip. "If you're not too tired, I'd like to show you something."

Will's brows rise, but he nods, allowing Hannibal to pull him to his feet. He puts his shoes and coat back on when Hannibal bids him do it, and they leave the house together – door unlocked, no one bothers him or ventures near the infamous murder house since he moved in without knowing he's there. Hannibal does not guide him to one of their cars, but merely takes Will's hand and leads him to the road. They walk slowly towards the town, the air without wind and a little chilly, summer heat surrendering passively to autumn as the days grow darker earlier, and the stars are bright pinpricks of light in the sky, the moon lighting their way.

Will wraps his arm in Hannibal's, their fingers still laced as he presses himself to his mate. Hannibal is a warm and solid presence at his side, dark and edged with silver. Truly the Shadow Man that saved Will from his nightmares when he was a child.

"What did you want to talk about, before?" he asks, his words muted and breath misting in the cold air.

Hannibal smiles. "Alice is Diane's grand-niece," he says, and Will blinks, because he didn't expect that. "It's how she and I came to know each other. I was talking about the festival with Diane and she practically insisted on bringing Alice to it, and spending the day with us."

Will hums.

"I'm not sure where my opinion or discussion comes into it then," he says, trying to joke; "Diane is not a woman I feel I could refuse." He laughs when Hannibal does. "We seem to surround ourselves with persistent, vibrant women. Have you noticed that?"

"I think there is a likeness in our characters, that attracts them," Hannibal replies with a warm smile, and leans in to nuzzle, briefly, at Will's hair. His other hand flattens over Will's, cradling his knuckles as they continue their walk. "It's refreshing to be around a gender and personality that doesn't tolerate boorish Alpha behavior."

"That's true," Will says. God knows Alana never lets him get away with anything. He thinks of Hannibal, younger, with Diane as his friend, as Alana is Will's, and grins, and wonders if she ever nagged him about his apparently unending bachelor status the way Alana did to Will. "But I have no issue with them coming. I think she and Deborah would get along well."

"I'm inclined to agree," Hannibal murmurs. He is quiet for a while, then says; "You surprise me."

"Oh?"

"You are keenly aware of boundaries, of the perceived limitations of social class that separates my friends from yours," Hannibal says – with no judgement, Will knows, and it's not like Will hasn't thought the same thing. "As well as that, your compulsive need to keep our two circles from merging. My friends remain in Baltimore, and yours remain here. It wasn't long ago you found the idea of even *me* meeting them to be uncomfortable."

"Things change," Will murmurs. "I meant what I said – I want everyone to know about us. I wish they could, with all the dark truth and consequences of it. And I know I can't get that, but I have no problem with our friends knowing each other." He pauses, and then says; "Diane and Alice don't seem the type to look down on a person just because they come from less money."

Hannibal huffs. "Diane and Alice only."

"Well, I can name a few of your friends who cling to class separation a little more stubbornly."

Hannibal smiles at him. "You are not fond of Bedelia," he notes, brows lifting.

Will shrugs. "I have no specific complaints."

"She is my oldest friend, but we met when things like money and where you sat in the Opera meant a great deal more than it does now." He sighs, and shakes his head. "Her family is traditional, I believe. I remember them being very distraught when she turned thirty, and became an 'undesirable' marrying age."

Will's nose wrinkles, and he huffs.

They are quiet for a while longer, and then something in Hannibal shifts – stiffens, just a little, and Will looks at him, head tilted, and he lets out a curious noise. Hannibal sighs. "I have been thinking about the location, for the wedding," he says softly, his eyes on the road to make sure they do not trip in potholes or accidentally wander into the verge. "There are many beautiful places in Baltimore, where we could have it. I know my friends would prefer to be in one of those lofty, timeless halls. But I quite like it here, and I know you prefer it here as well. It is, after all, the place where we first met, a place that holds great significance for both of us."

Will considers him, and frowns. "But you don't think it will suit their tastes."

"I have been fortunate, regarding my wealth and social standing, and a lot of excuses have been made for my more eccentric activities. My choice of mate." He is smiling, and Will rolls his eyes. "But I think their limit might be attending a wedding in a field."

Will hums, and doesn't answer.

"Well," he says carefully, and sighs, running a hand through his hair, "like I said before, it's really all up to you. Hell, as far as I'm concerned we can get married here, with my people, and then have a party in Baltimore for yours." He huffs, wincing. "I imagine Jack will want to attend as well. Alana and Beverly are close; she probably already knows and God knows she can't keep her mouth shut when it comes to stuff like this."

Hannibal smiles, showing teeth. "Ah, yes, Jack. I hope he hasn't been giving you too much trouble."

"He sends me cases, sometimes. I ignore him."

"I am glad," Hannibal murmurs, and squeezes Will's hand. "His behavior towards you, his treatment of you, almost destroyed you completely. I may never forgive him for that."

"He made me see you, as a patient," Will reminds him. "And that session is what brought me back here. Back to you, in a roundabout way. We should send him a gift basket."

Hannibal laughs, suddenly, and Will looks at him, brows risen. "I wonder what kind of present the Ripper could leave the head of the B.A.U., for helping him find his mate at last." Will huffs, but smiles, nudging his nose against the shoulder of Hannibal's coat and biting playfully.

"Don't be reckless, Doctor Lecter," he chides, and shakes his head when Hannibal merely smiles at him. Will sighs. "Now come on, what is this thing you wanted to show me?"

"This way," Hannibal murmurs, and lets their arms drop, fingers still laced. He guides Will onto a small driveway that passes between the first houses on the edge of the town, and Will frowns, but follows, careful to maintain his footing in the darkness as Hannibal leads him behind the houses, to where there is a set of large fields that normally house horses and cows. There is a barn, here, and Will only knows that because Deborah introduced him to the big bay mare that would be pulling the hay cart. They pass behind it, and Will goes still, breathing out in a shocked, awed gasp at what he sees.

In the next field, long stalks of corn rise up, silvery-brown in the moonlight. Around the edges are fairy lights, warm and glowing golden on posts, marking the borders. And, in front of them, a single arch, and a banner with bright red capital letters across it.

"A corn maze?" Will asks, and laughs when Hannibal smiles at him.

"I assisted Harrison with the design," he says, and looks so proud of himself. Will grins at him, squeezing his fingers as they approach it. "I thought that, since we will have no time to enjoy it during the actual festival, you might like to test it out with me."

Will laughs, but follows eagerly. "You know, every horror movie will tell you going into a corn maze in the middle of the night is just asking to get murdered."

"Then you must be vigilant, darling, for there is a dangerous man in our midst," Hannibal purrs, and tugs Will close to him as they duck under the banner, and enter. Within the maze, the scent of dry corn and wet earth is a heavy thing, the air humid and making Will sweat despite the chill of the night. He shivers, a long-buried, childlike instinct of fear rising up in him, and he presses close to Hannibal as they enter. Hannibal pulls out his cell phone and uses the light to guide their way, and they walk, and turn a corner, so Will can no longer see the entrance.

They walk for a while, and though Will does his best to memorize the turns and loops Hannibal leads him on, after a time he finds he's not quite sure he could make it out on his own. The maze is vast, larger than he thought it would be, and he has no idea if they are tucked into a corner of it, or nearing the heart. The idea of being trapped sends a strange little thrill through him.

Will presses his lips together, smiles playfully at his mate, and leans in close, makes his voice scared and soft and whispers; "Did you hear that?" Hannibal's brows lift, and he smiles, tilting his head as though there is actually something to hear. "I don't think we're alone."

Hannibal's eyes darken, flash with intrigue. He pulls Will close as though to reassure him, presses his cheek to Will's temple as Will clings to him, and he shines the light around as though looking for an intruder, a pair of glowing eyes watching them from the walls of the maze.

"There's a legend in these parts, from when I was a kid," Will says. "A witch who lives in the woods. People wander in and are never seen again."

"I don't believe in witches," Hannibal says, cocky and confident, and Will hides his smile against Hannibal's neck. "Don't worry, darling, I won't let anyone hurt you."

Will purrs, quietly, as Hannibal cards a hand through his hair, settles it on his nape, and tugs him closer, and Will's arms wrap around him. Of course, there is no witch, and they are the most dangerous people in a place like this. Hannibal nuzzles his cheek, kisses lightly at the corner of his mouth, and leads him on.

"Come with me," he murmurs, taking Will's hand again. "This isn't the part I wanted to show you. Come."

Will follows, growing breathless as they trek on. The moon lights only the topmost part of the cornstalks, Hannibal's phone light the only illumination in front of them, and it makes the shadows seem thicker and alive, pulling at their clothes and hair as Hannibal leads him deeper into the maze. A right turn, a left, another left, guided perhaps by a trail only he can see, Hannibal moves with confidence and does not falter for a second.

Until, finally, he comes to a stop, and puts his phone away, plunging them into true darkness. Will shivers, pressing close to him, and can't stop the little whine that trembles in his throat, because he knows he's safe, he is not afraid, but they are cold and alone out here, and he has seen far too much of man's cruelty to trust shadows when they are so dense around him.

But Shadow Man is here, and he turns to Will, cups his face and kisses him deeply. Will shivers, sliding his hands beneath the halves of Hannibal's coat, clinging to his suit jacket where it sits at the small of his back.

Hannibal growls, low and rumbling, and embraces Will fiercely, their bodies pressed tight together within the narrow alley of the maze. Though Will is sure it wasn't Hannibal's intention, the darkness surrounds them, makes Will feel buzzing and alive, and he knows if Hannibal were to make him bare his throat, to bite and tell Will to go his knees, he would. No one would hear their cries, this far away from civilization.

Hannibal pulls back, with one last, lingering kiss, his exhale loud and heavy in the stillness. "Come," he purrs, and cups Will's wrists, and leads him around one final corner, below an arch – it is not the exit to the maze, but it must be the heart of it, for Will steps out into an open square bordered by more corn. The moon shines down on the open space, and there are more lights fringing the edges, allowing him to see.

He gasps.

Hannibal has planted a garden, here. Within it, in a spiral that grows narrower in the middle, is a coil of thickly-clustered flowers. Flowers he recognizes. Amaryllis, and Birds of Paradise, and Queen Anne's Lace, Freesia, and Sunflowers. Things he knows should not bloom at this time of year, and yet Hannibal had made them, coaxed them into growing and shining in the light of the moon and the little orange bulbs that illuminate the space.

It's beautiful, a powerful testament of Hannibal's devotion, for Will knows Hannibal made this happen, somehow – he has no specific knowledge of what it takes to make so many different types of flowers grow, but Hannibal did this.

It is the singularly most romantic, beautiful gesture he has ever received. Would not have even thought himself capable of doing something like this, or being with someone who

would do something like this. But that is Hannibal – dramatic and thriving on grand displays such as what he's seeing.

Hannibal releases him, lets Will approach the flowers. He kneels beside them, and does not touch, but his fingers curl just above the nearest flower – a large blooming Amaryllis. Splendid beauty. His vision grows fuzzy, his throat thick, and he's not sure what to call the sound he's making, be it a whine or a purr or something in between.

"Hannibal, I…"

Shadow Man darkens his periphery, and Will looks up at him, finds Hannibal practically glowing with joy and pleasure.

Will swallows. "When did you do this? This must have taken weeks."

Hannibal nods, and casts his eyes upon his garden, all the pride of a god in him, who looks upon his design and finds it good.

"It did," he murmurs. Will wonders – perhaps he would do it on his way to and from Will, on Mondays and Thursdays. Maybe in the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep, even Will, he would prowl from Will's bed and plant his flowers and return before Will woke, rousing him with breakfast. He thinks of Hannibal, today, finishing the garden after meeting Malcolm and Deborah.

Will stands, and grabs Hannibal, tugging him into a passionate kiss. "I love it," he whispers, barely a breath. "I love it. *Thank you*."

Hannibal smiles, and his purr is loud and full of pride. "I'm so pleased you like it, my daydreamer," he murmurs, and kisses Will again, no less fiercely than before.

Will pulls back, unable to take his eyes away from the beautiful display. The spiral circles in, the spaces between it too narrow to walk, and not laid with any welcoming path or cobblestones to encourage trespassing. No, it is to merely see from the outside, and no one is allowed near the heart of it. No one in Will's heart, except Hannibal.

He shivers, and wets his lips. "I want to get married here," he says, and looks to Hannibal, finds him pleased, but not surprised by Will's decision. His eyes shine in the orange lights, the red ring in his iris thick and glowing, and Will cups his nape, slides his hands into Hannibal's hair, and rests their foreheads together.

"Then we will," Hannibal replies, alight with joy, his scent thick with that salted caramel sweetness. Will doesn't know what karma he possibly could have had that had earned him Hannibal's love, his devotion, his attention like this, but he will fight for it fiercely, and share it with no other.

Hannibal sighs, purring loud and low, and embraces Will in warm, strong arms. "Let me take you home, darling," he murmurs, soft with promise, and Will nods, shivering eagerly, and lets himself be led away. He pauses at the exit, sends one last look towards the lovely garden, and then Shadow Man tugs on his hand, and they are once again immersed in darkness.

Will wastes no time in shedding his clothes as they return to the house, and up to his bedroom. Hannibal is just as eager, readily baring himself so that Will can touch him, running his hands warm and wide over each inch of skin as it's exposed. He shows his teeth, growling against Hannibal's neck as they press together, rutting like animals, Hannibal's hand in his hair and tight on his hip, encouraging him to crush their bodies together.

He turns them, shoving Hannibal onto the mattress, and prowls into place in his lap. There is no thought in him, no desire, except to devour his mate, to reward him for his sweetness and his open adoration. He kisses Hannibal fiercely, cupping his nape tight enough for him to loose an instinctive snarl, and Will licks past his teeth, tasting wine and sweetness on his tongue, rolling his hips so their erections press together, warm and wet.

Hannibal's nails rake up his back, his hips buck up, seeking more friction, and Will parts from his kiss-bruised lips with a savage smile, spits on his palm and wraps his hands around both of them, teasing at the pressure and heat they both desire.

How could he ever want anything but this? Hannibal, panting and growling beneath him, his eyes reddening and his teeth on display. How could any distant family member, any friend, any promise of a child by blood compare to having Hannibal, all of him, all the time? It couldn't, Will knows it couldn't. He doesn't want anything other than this.

They kiss again, and Will shivers, panting against his mate's mouth as Hannibal curls his hands around Will's hips, holds him steady as he fucks into Will's fist, another savage snarl spilling in harmony from both of them as they rut together.

Will tilts his head, nosing at the raised scar on Hannibal's neck from where Will laid his first bite. He parts his jaws, sinks his teeth, purring when Hannibal growls and shivers beneath him. "I want you," he whispers, ragged and low. "Let me."

Hannibal nods, reaching for the bottle of lubricant Will keeps in the top drawer of his bedside table. Will pulls back, shivering when Hannibal spreads his legs and hands Will the bottle, and Will lets him go, takes it and wets his fingers, leaning down to nose at Hannibal's belly as he pushes between his thighs, until he finds where Hannibal is tight and dry, and works one finger inside him.

He sucks Hannibal into his mouth, moaning when Hannibal tugs on his hair, just sharp enough to be painful. Hannibal is a powerful Alpha, more instinct in him than even Will, and the price of his submission is teeth and claws. Wounds Will bears gladly, loving the feeling of Hannibal's nails in his back and teeth in his neck as Will mounts him.

He sinks down on Hannibal's cock, sucking as tight as he can, cheeks hollowing as Hannibal moans, snarls, spreads his legs a little wider as Will pushes his finger all the way inside, crooks it up in the same way that feels so good when Hannibal does it to him. Hannibal's body is tight around him, feverish and sweet and spasming, and Will moans again, lets the

vibrations of his throat tease his mate's sensitive cockhead, pulls his lips back so saliva drips down his shaft from the corners of his mouth, and uses that to stroke what he can't swallow.

He pushes in with another finger, whining when Hannibal's nails find his nape, dig into his bruised throat in something like warning, but more urgent than that. No threat, all desire, as Hannibal arches his hips to fuck into Will's mouth, bears down on his fingers, letting him inside.

The taste of his precum is sharp on Will's tongue and he drinks it eagerly, snarling when Hannibal gives another savage tug to his hair. He answers in kind; shoves his fingers in deep as they can go and curls them up, until he finds Hannibal's prostate. Presses against it, rubbing in little circles, as Hannibal shivers and his skin grows damp, shining with sweat.

"Will," he breathes, ragged and hoarse, and Will merely hums in answer, dragging the seal of his lips up in a slow stroke, then back down, taking Hannibal in until his throat spasms in protest. Still, he doesn't pull away – determined to the last, he lingers there, works his fingers apart to stretch Hannibal out and moans when Hannibal rakes his nails along Will's neck.

Will pulls off, impatience rising up in him in a wave of sharp heat. He flattens himself between Hannibal's legs, cups his neck and kisses him, nudging his thighs apart with his knees until Hannibal is spread open, ready. Their eyes meet, and Hannibal smiles, breathless and bright-eyed, showing his red.

Will kisses him again, swallows his growl as he wraps a hand around his cock, spreading the rest of the lubricant, and guides himself into Hannibal. Flattens his hands on Hannibal's hips to hold him still, and thrusts in.

Hannibal snaps his teeth, biting down on Will's bottom lip hard enough to hurt, and Will snarls, waits just long enough for Hannibal to lick over the bite with a soft murmur of apology, before he parts his jaws and bites right back; sinks his teeth into his mate's shoulder and fucks in, shuddering at the tight, hot clench of Hannibal's body as it makes room for him.

"*Fuck*," he snarls. Every time he does this, the feeling of being inside Hannibal is no less powerful, makes him *feel* no less powerful. To have a monster like Shadow Man yield to him so graciously is a heady thing, makes Will feel drunk and invincible, unstoppable.

Hannibal's thighs cling to his waist, his heels digging into Will's ass, encouraging him to push deeper, until he's buried fully inside his mate. His mouth is wet with Hannibal's blood, his skin coated with Hannibal's sweat, and maybe *Will* is the witch in the woods, for Hannibal makes him feel capable of magic.

Hannibal wraps his arms around Will's shoulders, digs in with his nails, and kisses the blood from Will's lips. He sighs, calming Will's tremors though his own body is shaking as well, and Will presses their foreheads together, breathing raggedly, sharing air.

He wastes no time – pulls back and fucks in again, watches with a smile as Hannibal's lashes flutter and his face goes slack with pleasure. He kisses, kisses again, gripping Hannibal tightly as he loses himself to the cling of Hannibal's muscles, the slick of his sweat, the taste

of his mouth and his scent, God, Will wishes he could bottle the scent of Hannibal, the sweetness of it he only gets when Will fucks him.

He licks down his mate's neck, finds his rushing pulse, bites down across it as Hannibal wraps his fingers in Will's hair, snarling in a mix of pleasure and pain. His body seizes up around Will, pinned below him, and Will grabs his thighs, hauls him up so that Will can fuck deeper, the mattress creaking underneath them.

Hannibal snarls at him, shows his teeth, bites Will's jaw and tugs on his hair. Will rises, lets go of one leg and cups Hannibal's cheek instead, making sure their eyes can meet, although the heat in Will's head is burning him, like a tease of rut, and he can't look anywhere but the red in Hannibal's iris.

"I love you," he murmurs, slowing, obeying the desperate need in him to tease the base of his cock against Hannibal's tight rim, encouraging his knot to swell. Hannibal stares up at him openly, slack and shivering with pleasure. Will swallows, licks blood from his teeth, leans down to brush their noses together. "You know -. You know I'd do anything for you, right? Anything you wanted."

Hannibal's gaze softens, he gentles his hands in Will's hair, arches up as Will goes still, shudders, hands flattening on Hannibal's thighs and keeping him spread open, hips jerking in little rabbiting thrusts to tease the swell of his knot.

"I know, my love," Hannibal breathes, and pulls Will over him, claiming his mouth in a kiss. His hands run down Will's back, settle on his hips, coaxing him to keep rutting as his knot starts to swell, pushing past Hannibal's rim, locking them tight together. Hannibal shivers when Will does it, shows his teeth and sucks a dark mark over Will's pulse. His hands slide back up, into Will's hair, petting him and purring loud as Will trembles, digs his nails into Hannibal's hips, and whines sharply when his knot swells fully, and he starts to come.

He moans, closing his eyes tightly shut, one fist in the sheets, his teeth against Hannibal's jaw. He reaches between them with his free hand, finds Hannibal's leaking cock and strokes him tight and quick. The way Hannibal clenches around him is heavenly, the heat and sweetness of his scent makes Will's mouth water. He licks and kisses his mate's neck, whines when Hannibal's ass clenches around his knot, forcing him to shiver and grunt as another load of come spills into Hannibal. Nuzzling, licking, teasing at bites, he can do nothing else but whimper as he draws Hannibal closer and closer to his own orgasm.

Hannibal goes still, breathes out heavily, when Will laps at the savage bite mark he laid to his shoulder, and his cock twitches in Will's hand, his stomach sinks in, and he comes with a ragged snarl and a jerk of his head, teeth caught in Will's skin and ripping through it, so Will may bear another of his bites. He wears every mark proudly, loves knowing, feeling, how powerful and savage his mate is.

They collapse together, a pile of sweaty limbs and warm, red flesh, to wait out Will's knot. He gasps, panting heavily against Hannibal's collarbone, purring to match the rumble in Hannibal's chest as Hannibal pets through his hair. He takes his hand from Hannibal's cock, wipes his fingers on the sheets, and pets down Hannibal's flank as Hannibal is so fond of

doing to him when they're tied together, pleased when Hannibal's purr grows stronger, lowers in pitch.

He smiles, and lets Hannibal pull him into a kiss, moaning weakly when the arch of Hannibal's body makes him spasm again, pulling another shiver of pleasure from Will's spine. He sighs, and doesn't think he will catch his breath or calm his heart any time soon, and nuzzles Hannibal's jaw when their kiss ends, settling against his mate's strong chest while they wait for his knot to go down.

He drags his nails idly through Hannibal's chest hair, hums when Hannibal happily resumes petting through his sweaty hair, dragging it back from his face and neck. It's late, almost the next day, and he doesn't want to sleep, but he's tired from their early morning and he's sure Hannibal is too.

He closes his eyes, rubs his nose over Hannibal's heart, and smiles. "You make me really happy, Shadow Man," he murmurs.

Hannibal's fingers go still, and his exhale is soft and pleased. "Just as you delight me, daydreamer," he whispers. "I think myself the luckiest man alive, every moment, knowing that you are mine."

Will's smile widens. He wraps his arms under Hannibal's back, embracing him tightly, and sighs, nosing at Hannibal's red neck.

Hannibal turns to him, and kisses his forehead. "I love you very much, Will," he breathes, as sacred as he might speak, one day soon, when they stand before God and all their friends and family and declare it to the world.

Will kisses him, because how could he not? He wants to do something for Hannibal, wants to give him a gift that would be the equal to that beautiful garden, to all the love and adoration Hannibal shows him every day. It will take some time, and planning, but he has an idea already of what he might do, and thinks it will suit.

The sun shines brightly, the air clear and sky cloudless, and the Fall Festival is in full swing. Will is coated with the scent of horses and hay, sitting beside Malcolm on the seat of the hay cart, idly toying with the long reins attached to the big bay mare while Malcolm helps the children climb on.

He smiles, when he spots a familiar mane of russet hair, and waves at Alice as she approaches. "Glad you could make it!" he says.

She grins at him, patting the mare's rump as the horse noses at a nearby patch of grass. She's wearing a sundress and hoodie to ward off the chill, Converse sneakers already covered in mud, and has her hair up in a messy ponytail. She looks a lot like Will imagines Margot looked, when she was a teenager.

"This place is awesome!" she says brightly, smiling up at him. Will doesn't see Diane, but imagines she is mingling as she is wont to do, attached to Hannibal at the adult bar, perhaps, or gossiping with Deborah. Will is glad that, despite his apprehension, running the hay rides with Malcolm hasn't grated on his nerves as much as he feared it might, and he has been so distracted that he hasn't had time to think of Alana's proposition.

Behind Alice, a group of children pass in front of the horse, shrieking with laughter and damp in places from what he assumes was a water gun fight. Two of them are carrying super soakers, bright orange and yellow plastic flashing in their hands.

"You want a ride?" he asks Alice.

"Do I get to sit up front?" she replies with a playful smile.

"Sure," Will says, "but I'll deny playing favorites."

She grins, and clambers up to sit beside him as they wait for Malcolm to finish loading the next cartful of children and mothers with babies too young to ride alone. Will smiles as he spots, in the crowd, Elijah and Molly and Wally, clustered around a little table with drinks in their hands. Elijah catches his eye, sensitive to the gaze of Alphas, and offers him a bright smile, and a little wave.

Alice pulls the halves of her hoodie around her more tightly, curling her knees up and jogging her heels. "I want to come here every year," she declares, drawing Will's attention again. "I don't get to hang around with kids my age, really. Even at school."

"Why's that?"

She rolls her eyes. "My mom insisted on enrolling me in college courses since I was like, fifteen," she says with a wave of her hand. "Not AP in high school, you understand, like, legitimate college courses on a college campus. Everyone there is an *adult*. And then there's Doctor Lecter, and my aunt, and all their friends. I don't know, it's nice to be around kids for once."

Will hums, considering that. He himself never really felt a kinship with people his own age, besides Alana – and now, Margot, though she is a few years younger than he and Alana are. Even when he was a kid, he gravitated to people like John, people like Chris, wanted more than anything to be a grownup, and to see the world the way grownups see it. The way Shadow Man sees it.

"Well, you're always welcome here," he tells her, and smiles when Malcolm climbs aboard and takes the reins from him. "Malcolm, this is Alice, she's a friend of mine and Hannibal's. Alice, this is my neighbor Malcolm."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Alice," Malcolm says with a nod and a kind, wide smile. He clucks his tongue and flicks the reins, and the mare snorts, ears perked forward, and starts to walk on. The hay ride takes them around the cornfield, past the barn and edging the woods behind Will's house, and Will's breath catches as it has every time he sees the maze, knowing what lingers at the heart of it.

"So!" Alice chirps after a moment. "My aunt tells me you're starting to really get into the wedding planning. Are you gonna have it here?"

"I think so," Will replies with a nod, smiling at her. "I like the idea of getting married in the open, you know? And this place means a lot to both of us."

She nods, accepting that, and crosses one leg over the other.

"I like it," she declares. "Plus, I think it's way better to raise a family out in a place like this. Not in the city." Her nose wrinkles. "My mom grew up in a small town, she says she prefers it out there. It's upstate, near the ocean."

"Sounds nice," Will replies. His stomach clenches, turning sour at the mention of children. He had often wondered if Omegas and women were exaggerating when they complained about their families harassing them to get married or mated and start breeding. Maybe that's just the way things work – he wouldn't really know. That's the kind of thing he never paid attention to, because it didn't matter once he knew Shadow Man was an Alpha. It was never a possibility in his mind, after he presented as one too.

He sighs, and doesn't answer. The rest of the hay ride passes in relative quiet, only broken by the horse's breathing, the creak and judder of the cart, and the laughter of children behind them as they 'ooh' and 'ahh' and enjoy the ride.

When they return, Malcolm says they will take a break to let the horse rest, so Will goes to the bar, finding Hannibal behind it with Deborah, Diane on the other side, the two women chattering away as Will approaches, Alice in tow.

Hannibal smiles at him, and circles the bar, squeezing his shoulder and planting a swift, chaste kiss to his cheek. "Hello, darling," he purrs, and then pauses, scenting Will. He huffs, laughing. "You stink of horse."

"You stink of wine," Will returns, but he's smiling. Diane is nursing some of the lemony wine Hannibal made, and she grins at both of them in greeting, but doesn't divert her attention for longer from her conversation. "How are you?"

"Excellent," Hannibal replies. "I'm enjoying myself immensely."

"Good," Will says. Near them, another flock of children rushes by, and this time Will pays attention – watches Hannibal regarding them. Notes a softening around his eyes, a subtle upward twitch to his mouth. He looks…not quite longing, but curious, like the children are an interesting species of animal he wishes to study.

Will's stomach tightens again, that croaking thought ricocheting loudly in his head. He flattens a hand on Hannibal's chest, gaining his attention again, and notes that it takes a little longer than normal for Hannibal to pull his gaze away.

He thinks of what Hannibal has told him, about family – he has never said in explicit terms that he wants a child with Will. Only acknowledged that Will would have them, if he was able. But he's not able, he never will be. But that's just from a biological standpoint. They have never discussed, really, the option of growing their family in other ways.

Choosing them, not through blood, but a bond stronger than that.

Will isn't quite sure he has come to a decision regarding Alana's proposal, only knows that, as it stands right now, he would refuse. But perhaps this is a decision he can't make on his own. That he shouldn't make on his own. As much as a kid would be biologically his, it would be Hannibal's too, for there is no part of Will, no piece of him, that he could give to another, that Hannibal hasn't touched.

"I need to talk to you about something," he says. "When the festival is over."

Hannibal's head tilts, his eyes dark with intrigue. "Is this that subject you didn't wish to broach before?"

Will bites his lower lip, and nods.

Hannibal nods with him, sighs, and pets through his hair in a gentle touch. "Should I be worried?"

"No," Will replies, vehemently. "I swear. I promise."

At that, Hannibal smiles, and kisses his forehead. "Very well. When you are finished with Malcolm, come find me, and I will cede the stand to Deborah, and we will leave, and talk about whatever you'd like."

Will swallows, and nods, and hopes that by the time that happens his nerves have calmed somewhat. He doesn't hold much hope, and tucks his nose to Hannibal's neck, breathing in deeply and hoping that the scent of his mate will fortify him, and give him strength to bear the rest of the day.

He hears Malcolm calling for him, and pulls back with a sigh. "That's my cue," he says.

Hannibal smiles at him, and releases him after one more kiss to his hair. "I'll see you soon, my love."

Will smiles, and nods, brushing their knuckles together, before he turns away and rushes off to find Malcolm and start their afternoon shift.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day comes and goes, and Will helps Malcolm pack up the cart and lead the horse back to the barn so that she can rest. Her flanks are sweaty, her nostrils flared wide as she walks behind them with her head hung low, and Will walks behind Malcolm, at her shoulder, giving her a sympathetic pat and scratching her withers as she walks.

"Wore her out real good today," Malcolm says, and grins over his shoulder at Will. From his pocket he fishes out a cluster of mints and holds them beneath her muzzle, her ears perking up as she whickers and lips at his hand, eating them, crushing them between her teeth.

"She's not the only one," Will replies, and though he is exhausted, he's glad that between Hannibal, Malcolm, and Deborah, he was convinced to help out with the fair. The day was beautiful from sun-up to sundown, and being around so many simply happy people was refreshing. He forgets, sometimes, cooped up in his house with only murder and blood for company, how starkly colorful the rest of the world is. There is life, here, and healing in everything. He feels, strange as it sounds, closer to how he was when he was a younger man, fresh out of high school and ready to go to college; a thirst has awakened in him, to see more of the world, to see if every place is as colorful, as vibrant, as wonderfully satisfying to be in as this one is.

They lead the horse to the little ring in front of her stall, tie her loosely and hose her down, brushing her until she's damp but clean. It's a calming task, grooming the horse, and she is docile and content to eat her hay and wait for them to finish, before they lead her into the stall and close and bolt it.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I could use a beer," Malcolm says, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Will smiles, and nods, and they leave through the other end of the barn, near the corn maze. Will stops, his breath catching when he sees the entry way. It's still open, but will close soon, he thinks, so people don't get trapped inside after nightfall. He sees Alice wandering into it with another girl her age, disappearing in a fit of giggles and soft whispers.

Malcolm smiles. "Did you get a chance to see the garden?"

"I did," Will breathes, both strangely flustered and pleased that Malcolm knows about it. Of course, he'd have to, being the one in charge of designing it with Hannibal's help. "It was beautiful. Did you help him with it?"

"Not at all, save for sourcing the flowers he wanted." Malcolm is quiet for a moment. Then, he says, slowly; "Your mate's got an eye for flora."

Will tilts his head, as Malcolm turns and starts back towards the town. Will jogs to catch up, and falls into step beside him.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm not exactly the most green-thumbed guy in the world, but he was so insistent on particular flowers, you know, damn the climate, it got me curious, so I looked them up to see what they might mean." Will swallows, his breath catching, but he forces himself not to falter step. "I guess it's just…. I won't call it surprising, because anyone with eyes can see how much you love each other. But it's a gesture I would think more suited to a…"

He trails off, and Will lifts his head, meeting Malcolm's eyes. "I won't be offended," he says softly.

"Well, flowers, marriage, all that… Seems more like woman's work."

Will nods. Though Harrogate and its townspeople have been welcoming overall, it doesn't surprise him to know there's some reservations from the more conservative members of the town. Malcolm is of that age to have been raised by the 'Good Old Boy' generation, even if he's not a part of it himself.

"I think Hannibal is more of the opinion that gestures of love shouldn't be confined to one gender or sex," Will replies, as evenly as he can. In truth, he's not even that annoyed at the implication – Hannibal is the most powerful, most capable man he's ever met, and Will knows that would be true if he was a woman, if he was an Omega, if he was something in between or identified as neither.

He can feel Malcolm's discomfort, worry over offending Will, bleeding through the air between them. Seeking to soothe, he adds; "My cousin called me, pretty much invited himself to the wedding, and insisted we fly down before then to introduce everyone. I'm nervous about bringing Hannibal to them. They're…traditional folk. I don't know how they'll react to us both being Alphas."

Malcolm nods, humming along. "Deborah's family didn't really like me either," he says, and Will blinks up at him, surprised; "They didn't want her marrying an Alpha. Her older sister's husband was a real jackass to her, soured their opinion of the whole gender, really. Took a lot of smooth-talking and makin' nice to smooth things over."

Will swallows. "Got any advice?"

"Well, if he's half as charming with them as he is all the rest of the time, I don't think you'll have to worry," Malcolm says with a grin half-conspiring, half fond. Will can't find it in himself to disagree. "But I've found food is a real good way to win the family over."

Will laughs. His family would certainly appreciate the hunter's instinct in Hannibal, but the food itself, he's sure, would not be the way to win them over. "Thanks," he says instead, smiling as they approach the outskirts of the fair, which is just starting to dissemble. Torches are going up, bathing the air in warm firelight, and people have started breaking out stereos

and iPods here and there, filling the place with conflicting music. The wine will flow, people might dance; the air is warm, and the sky is cloudless.

"Well, I promised Hannibal I'd meet him after we were done with the rides. Thanks for the advice. Have a good night," Will says, and Malcolm grins at him, and they exchange a nod and a clasp of forearms.

"Have a good night, Will. I'll see you later!" And as Will veers towards the adult beverage station, Malcolm's attention is caught by a nearby group of Alphas whom Will recognizes from the churchgoing group.

No one bothers him as he navigates the crowds and lingering patrons, everyone plastered to the various stalls and places to get food and drink. He spies Hannibal easily, and approaches the bar, skirting past the long line until he can see his mate. Hannibal turns, and smiles at him, and leans in to exchange a quick word with Deborah. She nods, and makes a shooing motion with both her hands. Behind the bar, Molly and Elijah are there now, and take Hannibal's vacated spot in serving drinks as he leaves the bar and goes to Will.

"Hello, darling," he murmurs in warm welcome, embracing him gently and nosing at his hair. He huffs. "You know, the scent of horse is growing on me; I find it suits you. Perhaps you were a cowboy in another life."

"If you make a joke about assless chaps, the wedding's off," Will replies, and Hannibal laughs, his eyes bright with mirth. Will laces their fingers together and tugs him away from the bar, towards the main road, and they fall into step beside each other, ambling with no real direction except that it is away from the fair, and vaguely in the direction of Will's house.

"I will hold my comments and jokes about uniform to myself, then, risqué or otherwise," Hannibal says lightly, squeezing Will's hand, and lifts his knuckles to kiss them. Will can smell wine on him, a little hint of sweat from the long day; the sharp aftertaste of beer where it must have spilled on the ground, staining his shoes. He presses close and noses at Hannibal's shoulder, letting out a soft sigh when Hannibal kisses his hair.

"Long day," he murmurs, and Hannibal makes another quiet, agreeing sound. "Do you have any more of your wine?"

"I held back a bottle of blackberry at the house, just for you," Hannibal replies with another small smile. "It's your favorite so far, yes?"

Will nods. The blackberry-peach wine reminds him of the cobbler Deborah made for him, when he first moved here. It is, he thinks, the flavor of new beginnings, for here is where he found himself. Here, is where he found Shadow Man, and kept him for good.

They walk slowly, feeling neither urgency nor hurry. The sounds of the festival fade, replaced with chittering rodents and the soft crackling whir of insects; fireflies, blinking in and out of existence around them. Above them, the soft *whoosh* of a bird of prey. The crack and crunch of leaves as foxes begin their nighttime hunts.

Will sighs. He hasn't allowed himself to think about the conversation he promised Hannibal until now, but the moments of silence stretch out, long and waiting, like a cat staring at them from the shadows. It will leap, as inevitably as snow in winter, and Will doesn't want to be speared. He doesn't want to delay it, for he knows even if he refuses Alana's offer, he needs to talk about it with Hannibal.

"I don't know if I'm ready for this," he whispers.

Hannibal tilts his head.

"The thing Alana wanted to talk to me about."

"Ah," Hannibal murmurs, and nods, gently brushing his thumb along the back of Will's hand. "We don't have to, if you need more time."

"No, we should. Sooner rather than later."

Hannibal's expression holds no worry, just the open curiosity and earnestness Will has come to expect from him – just as Will grew up ravenous for the world and all its secrets, all its mysteries and knowledge, Hannibal feels the same thirst when it comes to Will's thoughts. As though Will is the most fascinating museum, full of wonders and artifacts he has never seen before; he wants to live there, Will knows, buried in a mutual mind palace and only coming up for air.

"Perhaps once we are home, and have wine."

Will swallows, pressing his lips together. He wets them, and says; "Might need something stronger than that."

Hannibal's brows lift, just a fraction, before returning to their normal place. He squeezes Will's hand, and says nothing.

They return to the house, and Will lets Winston and Addy out into his backyard as Hannibal hangs their coats, corrects their shoes by the door, lights a fire, and pours them wine. When Will returns with his dogs, whistling for them to come in through the kitchen and closing the door, so that they are trapped within it and able to go out if they need to, he traipses in and finds Hannibal sitting at his little dining room table.

Between them is one of Will's notebooks, a pen tucked between the pages. In case he has to write what he feels.

Unbidden, but not unwelcome, a flood of affection washes over him, and Will's eyes burn with red and water as he takes the free seat. After a moment, he shifts it over, so that when he sits, his knee can touch Hannibal's, and he can hook one of his feet behind his mate's ankle.

He reaches for the notebook and pulls it into his lap, fingertips grazing along the pen. But he doesn't open it. Doesn't write.

The dark wine sits between them, bottle and two very full glasses. Will reaches out, takes his, as Hannibal does. Drinks, as Hannibal does. Sets his glass down, as Hannibal does.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, and leans forward, gently touching Will's cheek. "Darling, I can feel your racing heart from here. Are you afraid?"

"Not afraid," Will says. Fear isn't the word. "Uncertain, maybe. I don't like approaching a conversation without the vaguest idea of how you're going to react." Hannibal nods, pressing his lips together, then pursing them out.

He straightens in his seat, and sits back, the picture of refinement and poise. "Perhaps," he says slowly, "this would be easier for you, not to begin the conversation, but simply to allow me to guess. If I guess right, you will tell me, and we can go from there."

Will tilts his head, gazing down at the notebook. He takes his wine and swallows another large mouthful. "Okay."

Hannibal nods, and lifts his eyes, contemplating the ceiling. Will takes another drink, and another, and wordlessly refills his glass from the bottle as Hannibal thinks. Then, he says; "Alana wanted to speak to you alone. This means that it's either something that she thinks only you can help her with, or it's something she *only* wants you to help her with."

Will swallows, and sets his glass down. He hasn't eaten all day, and his head buzzes faintly already with the heady wine, reminding him of that fact. "Warm," he murmurs. "Like…sixty degrees."

Hannibal smiles at him. "Are we using Celsius?" he says, teasing.

Will flushes. "Yeah. Water temperature."

"A light simmer, then," Hannibal says with a nod. "Alright." He drums his fingers along his thigh, in a slow tap-tap-tap that Will stares at, because he can't quite meet his mate's eyes. He drinks, as Hannibal takes another sip. "Am I correct in assuming this has nothing to do with the wedding? I can't think of something that she would need to speak to you about and not me, if that were the subject."

Will nods.

Hannibal nods as well, mimicking him.

He hums, tilting his head, and Will knows he's being watched, but he can't bring himself to lift his eyes. His fingers curl anxiously around the notebook, his heart hammering behind his ribs, and he presses his thighs together, heels rising like he might bolt from the table.

"May I have a hint?"

Will swallows.

"Two mothers and two daughters went out to eat. Everyone ate one burger, yet only three burgers were eaten in all. How is this possible?"

Hannibal smiles, showing his teeth, and he murmurs; "There were three women. A daughter, a mother, and a grandmother."

Will nods. Sucks in a breath, and says; "What has four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs at night?"

"The lifecycle of man," Hannibal replies. He pauses, and his head tilts.

Will swallows again, and lifts his gaze. Meets those of his mate; dark, so very dark. "As I was going to Saint Ives, I met a man with seven wives. Each wife had seven sacks, each sack had seven cats…" He takes a drink of wine. "Each cat had seven kits. Kits, cats, sacks and wives – how many were going to Saint Ives?"

"Just the one," Hannibal says. He pauses, and Will flushes, looking away. "These riddles share a theme."

Will nods.

"Children," he whispers.

Hannibal does not make a sound, but his fingers stop their tapping countdown. They curl against his thigh. "Children," he repeats, and huffs a laugh that's almost strained. Will winces. "I admit it's been a long time since I practiced physical medicine, but I don't believe two women are capable of making a child on their own without some procedural help."

Will nods.

"Does she intend to adopt? No, that wouldn't warrant your involvement," he says before Will can reply. "She wants you to donate."

Will swallows, and drains his second glass.

"Yes," he says, simply, and sets the glass down. He feels like he might vibrate out of his skin – he hasn't been this nervous since the night he introduced Hannibal to the townsfolk, but even then he'd been too wrapped up in his possessiveness, his sharp-clawed jealousy, to be this affected by it. He might be sick.

"She asked you to donate sperm for artificial insemination?"

Will nods again. "Apparently Margot's dad put in his will that unless they have an Alpha heir, all their money gets taken away when Mason dies. Mason's too sick to make babies anymore, but as Margot's wife, Alana can have a kid for them, and it would legally be a Verger."

Hannibal is motionless, and silent. Will closes his eyes, and ducks his head. "Please say something."

"I…am surprised," Hannibal says, slowly. He sounds almost like Bedelia. Will grits his teeth, grinds his molars together, jaw bulging at the corners. Then he says; "This is not the first time the subject of children has come up between us."

"I know you…value family," Will says. He opens his eyes to slits, cants his gaze towards Hannibal, but sees nothing that gives away his emotions, or his mood. It's unnerving, not to

be able to read him; "And you know I don't. Not like you do. 'The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb' and all that shit. But I also see how you look at kids."

Hannibal doesn't deny it.

"Did you ever want children?"

Hannibal is quiet, for far too long. "I never considered it a possibility. I subscribe to the ideal family, one born of love and mutual trust. By the time I considered myself open to the suggestion, I had found you, and knew our union could not create children, so it once again became an idea of something I would never have."

Will swallows. "That's not an answer."

"Will, if either of us were an Omega, or a woman, and we could bear young, and you wanted to, I would happily do it. But we are not – why indulge in the impossible?"

"Our whole relationship is impossible," Will replies, and meets his gaze fully. "But it happened. And yeah, if I could have your kids, if you wanted me to, I would, but…"

He swallows, and looks away again. Stares at the bottle of wine and wonders if Hannibal would stop him pouring himself a third glass.

He does it anyway. Hannibal doesn't stop him.

"You told me once, what were your exact words; 'I know better than to breed'." Will winces into his glass, and drains half of it. "Another nugget of shame you hold in your chest that I fear I may never cure, even if you were open to letting me try. If you passed on those genetic traits you fear so much to Alana's child, would you not be going against what you feel in your heart to be true?"

"I don't want to dance around this, Hannibal – just tell me. If I agreed to it, would you be okay with that?"

Hannibal sighs through his nose, his lips thin and pressed tight together. "Truthfully?"

"Of course."

"The idea of a child with your beauty, your disposition, is a lovely one. But the knowledge that that child would not be even partly mine is…" He swallows, an uncharacteristic display of displeasure crossing his face, and drops his eyes to his neglected wine glass.

Will nods, slowly. "I feel the same," he replies, and Hannibal's eyes snap to him. "But we wouldn't be raising it."

"Truthfully, my love, that is simply another strike against the whole proposition. Had you mated and fathered a child before you became mine – that I could forgive, and I would love it as my own. But fathering one for Alana, after we have come to know each other, and knowing we would have the barest hand in raising it?" He sighs, and shakes his head.

Will isn't surprised by the answer – it's the one he expected, and knowing Hannibal feels the same complicated mix of reservations he does settles him somewhat. He bows forward, and places his hand over Hannibal's on Hannibal's thigh, waiting until his mate meets his gaze. "She told me it was just a question," he murmurs gently. Hannibal hums, and turns his hand so their fingers can lace. "No pressure; she wanted to give me the option, in the interest of mutual legacy."

"Mutual legacy?" Hannibal repeats.

Will nods. "Like you said, we can't have kids. When we die, there's no one to inherit from us. But that doesn't matter to me, it never has." He lowers his head further, places the notebook on the table, and rises, sliding closer until he's standing next to Hannibal, and smiles when Hannibal pushes his chair back, giving him room to sit.

Will worms one of his knees between his mate's, leans down and presses their foreheads together. In the firelight, Hannibal is a mix of orange and black shadows, and with Will as he is, he blocks the light entirely, casting Hannibal into darkness. "I love you," he breathes, free hand cupping Hannibal's face. "Always, only you. That comes with no caveats or conditions. Kids or no kids, you are mine."

Hannibal shivers, and lifts his chin, a nuzzling kiss placed to Will's mouth. "And you are mine," he replies, just as quietly. "Forgive me for saying so, but I simply cannot stomach the thought of sharing you, my love. With anyone."

"We're in agreement on that," Will replies with another smile. "I'll tell Alana the answer's 'No'."

A soft rumble crosses the scant air between them, and Hannibal sighs, curling his fingers in Will's hair. "I appreciate you asking me, darling," he says. "I'm only sorry it caused you so much stress, to broach the subject."

"I appreciate your honesty," Will replies, and presses closer, sliding into Hannibal's lap and crushing their bodies together so he can feel Hannibal's purr resonate through his own chest. "I'm sorry; I just wanted to know how I felt about it before I brought it to you. In case you tried to convince me otherwise."

Hannibal's hands slide down his back, arms loosely settling around Will's waist. He noses at Will's neck, breathes in his scent, and sighs warmly against his throat, making Will shiver. "Given my recent behavior, I can see why you thought I might be open to the idea. But no – either a child is both of ours, or it's neither."

Will nods. "I agree," he says, and kisses lightly at the arch of Hannibal's ear. He wraps his arms around Hannibal's shoulders, clinging to him gently, and sighs again. "Sometimes I wish I could," he confesses – it's not the first time he said as much. When they played their reversal game, when Hannibal sought to drive Will to the point of rabid desperation, so much so that Will ended up in rut by the end of it, they talked about children, about breeding.

Hannibal's eyes flash with similar memory, and he growls softly, kissing open-mouthed along Will's neck. "You would look beautiful," he whispers, and touches Will's belly almost

absently, as though testing to see if it is, somehow, swollen. "And our child would be, too. But I would not wish you any other way than how you are – you are perfect to me, my daydreamer, and I love you as I have loved no other."

Will swallows, his throat too tight to speak. He clings to Hannibal with sharp nails and kisses his cheek, his jaw – his mouth, when Hannibal lifts his head and asks in silence for a kiss. It's a warm thing, simmering with the promise of higher heat, and Will shivers.

"Shadow Man," he breathes, and Hannibal blinks up at him, eyes wide and dark. Ravenous, Will thinks; that's the word for the look in his eyes. Hannibal isn't immune to the idea – Will's memory of that day is branded with salt and iron. Though it's impossible; "Can we pretend?"

Hannibal's lip twitches up, an instinctive snarl rumbling in his throat. He tightens his hand on Will, and stands, pushing them both to their feet, and kisses Will with teeth and tongue, guiding him towards the stairs.

By the end of it, Will is sore and thoroughly used, his neck clawed and bitten, his stomach bearing similar lines of aching pre-bruises from Hannibal mounting him from behind, flat to his belly like an Omega in heat, hips raised so that Hannibal's seed can pool deep inside him. He gasps, caught on Hannibal's knot, stroking himself tight and quick as Hannibal snarls and bites his shoulder, opening a recent welt and sending a sharp shaft of pain into the base of his skull.

"That's it, darling," Hannibal growls, and his mouth is wet with blood and saliva, soaking into Will as he grips Will's hips tightly, working him back onto his knot, and Will clenches, and comes with a whimper, spilling over his hand and between his knees on their bed. "Oh, Will, *yes*."

He shudders, and rests heavy on Will's shoulders, nuzzling his nape.

Will collapses to the bed, flat and spent, purring weakly as Hannibal covers him despite the sticky sweat coating their skin and the unbearable heat between them. He turns his head and kisses his mate's jaw, licks his own blood from Hannibal's teeth when Hannibal kisses him.

Hannibal sighs, rolling his hips to tease the seal of his knot inside of Will, sending warm fissures of pleasure up his spine, that tease at his eyes and lick along the back of his neck. He shivers, and says; "I don't know how I'm going to handle not being able to touch you like this, when we're with my family."

Hannibal hums, soft with sympathetic displeasure. "Perhaps a hotel room would not be out of the question," he suggests. "Though your cousin's home is large enough to house us, yours is not, should all his family visit. We could put them up somewhere."

Will laughs. "They're not going to let you pay for a hotel room, and there isn't one big enough, close enough, here." He shakes his head. "You brought this on yourself, Doctor

Lecter."

Hannibal smiles, nosing the corner of Will's mouth. "Then I will simply have to make up for lost time, when they're gone," he murmurs. "Have you had a chance to speak with Chris?"

Will shakes his head, sighing as Hannibal rolls them to their sides so that they're more comfortable as they wait out his knot, and Will tugs on the sheets, pulling it over them to keep them warm as they cool and settle. "I'll call him tomorrow. Alana too. And I'll need to get some stuff for the guest room so there's a place for them all to sleep."

Hannibal nods, nuzzling Will's sweaty hair. "Let me know if you agree on a time to visit; either him coming here, or us going down. I will have to reschedule some appointments, I'm sure, but my patients are thankfully very easy to move around."

Will huffs, thinking of Franklyn. If the rest of them are anything like that puppy-like Omega Will slaughtered, he isn't surprised. Hannibal's regard is a precious thing; something Will can and has fought savagely for. If he were a patient, he would bend over backwards to accommodate Hannibal's schedule.

He settles a hand over Hannibal's, where it rests on his heart. They remain in comfortable silence, until sleep comes for both of them and drags them under.

True to his word, with the scents of breakfast reaching him in the bedroom, Will takes his cell phone and pulls up Chris' unsaved number. Chris answers on the third ring; "Hey, shrimp!"

"Hey, man," Will replies, rolling his eyes at the nickname that, apparently, no time or distance will ever let him shake off. "I talked to Hannibal, and he says he's free to come down and see you guys. I was thinking we'd visit over a weekend or something; fly down and hang out."

"Awesome! Gimme a second. Lisa!" There's the sound of muffled movement, and Will rolls onto his back, staring at the ceiling as he hears a dog barking, the shriek of children and their heavy pattering feet, and then Chris' voice again; "Hey babe. Will's on the phone. We good for the weekend if he wants to visit with his Omega?"

Will winces. He feels like he should really correct Chris before they get down there, but before he can say anything, he hears Lisa reply, and then Chris' voice again. "Yeah, so we're free pretty much the next three weekends. I think dad is visiting next weekend so, you know, it'll be a whole big reunion. Y'all should come down then."

"Alright," Will murmurs. "Hey, Chris?"

"What's up, shrimp?"

"I need to tell you something."

"Yeah?" Chris moves again, and the sounds of dogs and children disappear. Instead, Will hears a distant lawnmower, the rumble of a passing truck, and assumes Chris stepped outside.

Will clears his throat, and swallows harshly. Now or never; "Hannibal isn't an Omega, man."

There is, for a moment, utter silence on the other end of the phone. Even the lawnmower goes quiet, like it's listening in. Will's heart jumps behind his ribs, and he looks up as Hannibal opens the door, but remains quiet, seeing Will is on the phone. He mouths 'Chris', and Hannibal nods in understanding, coming in and standing at the foot of the bed.

His chin lifts, and his brow creases at the scent of Will's distress. He lets out a quiet purr, circles to the head of the bed, and sits, petting through Will's hair as Will curls around his hips and rests his head by Hannibal's thigh.

"You're mated to and marrying an Alpha?" Chris finally says. He doesn't sound…angry. No, not quite angry. Confused. Really fucking confused.

Will sighs. "Yeah. He's an Alpha. I wanted you to know. If that's gonna be a problem, I'd rather not know about it, but I also don't wanna come visit."

"I mean…. *Shit*, man," Chris huffs. Will can picture him now, though his memory paints Chris at seventeen, just beginning to pack on muscle with that thousand-watt smile, and permanent bruises on his jaw and under his eyes from getting into fights with other Alphas. "I, ah, didn't know you swung that way."

Will swallows.

"I don't have a problem with it!" Chris continues, in that way people do when they're trying to be supportive. It reminds Will a little bit of Elijah, when he'd first found out. "And Lisa's brother's gay. It's, you know, it's fine. I'm cool with it, really. I know I don't sound like I'm cool with it, I'm just surprised is all, but yeah – shit! Bring him down. I wanna meet him even more now."

Will's lips twitch in a smile, and he closes his eyes, nuzzling Hannibal's wrist as Hannibal keeps petting him.

"As long as he treats you right, or you treat him right…however that works. I don't need to know how that works – you're like my kid brother though, y'know? I want you to be happy and if this guy makes you happy then, yeah." Chris laughs; an uncomfortable, nervous noise. Will's never heard him be so out of his element.

He smiles a little wider. "Thanks, man, I appreciate it. And yeah, he makes me real happy, promise."

"Good," Chris says. "I might have to warn dad though. He's, he's traditional, y'know?"

Will knows. "Yeah, of course."

"But shit, he's a cranky old bastard anyway so even if he doesn't like the guy it probably wouldn't even be 'cause he's an Alpha." Chris laughs. "Alright, alright, so! Any time on

Friday's good, Lisa's free, she can pick you up from the airport and I'll be there after work. Then like I said, weekend's open, and if y'all need a ride on Monday we can figure it out. Sound okay?"

"Sounds great, Chris, thanks. I'll let you know the flight details once we've booked 'em."

"Alright, shrimp. Lookin' forward to it. You guys have a good week and I'll see you Friday!"

"See ya." Will hangs up the call, breathing out heavily, and tosses his phone behind him on the bed, turning and nuzzling Hannibal's thigh, sighing again.

"He took it well, I assume?" Hannibal murmurs.

Will nods. "Well as he could've, yeah."

Hannibal is quiet, and then he makes a soft sound of amusement, and Will turns his head, blinking up at him. "You revert back to your roots when you speak to your family," he notes. "The accent, the drawl. It's quite lovely."

Will blushes, and bites lightly at Hannibal's thigh.

"Next you're gonna tell me you want me to talk dirty to you in French."

Hannibal's hand goes still. He blinks down at Will, dark eyes flashing with interest. "Do you speak any French?" he asks, too-lightly.

Will grins at him, off-kilter and wide. "Maybe."

"I…would be very interested to hear it, sometime. I'm fairly fluent myself."

"Cajun French isn't like Paris French, Hannibal."

Hannibal smiles at him. "Still," he purrs, and tucks Will's hair behind his ear. "You are full of surprises, my love."

"I'd hate for you to get bored," Will replies with a roll of his eyes. He nudges his nose against Hannibal's hand, silently asking to be pet more, and sighs, lashes fluttering when Hannibal obeys without a word, nails dragging pleasantly along Will's scalp. "He said we can fly in any time on Friday, that Lisa will be able to pick us up, and they're free the whole weekend. My uncle David will be there too, if we go this weekend."

Hannibal nods. "I'll research flights over breakfast," he promises. "Now come – I know you didn't eat much yesterday, and you must maintain your strength."

Will huffs, but lets Hannibal pull him to his feet. "You intend to wear me out?"

"Truthfully, my love, hearing your accent returning has given me quite a surge of energy. I might insist on keeping you in bed all day."

"You're terrible," Will says in mock complaint. Hannibal smiles at him over his shoulder, leading him to the dining room table, where there are two plates of eggs melted together with cheese, sliced pieces of sausage, a veritable tower of toast with an array of jams and jellies available – and, of course, steaming mugs of coffee. It smells wonderful, and Will takes his seat with a sigh, smiling when Hannibal mimics him on the other side of the table.

Hannibal has his tablet beside his plate, and they eat in comfortable silence as he pulls up a website to book flights, forgoing the rental car and hotel option for now. He makes a quiet noise of satisfaction a few minutes in, and forwards the email to Will so that, when he retrieves his phone, he can text the flight information to Chris.

"You better not have us getting the airport at three in the Goddamn morning again."

"Of course not," Hannibal replies with a smile. "The flight's at noon."

"Good," Will says, and grins when Hannibal huffs a laugh. Noon is a much more acceptable time, but will mean they might have to deal with the midmorning traffic around Baltimore. He makes a note to insist Hannibal be the one to drive them. He cradles his coffee mug in both hands, sipping idly, and sighs at the rich flavor as it coats his tongue.

Hannibal eyes him, assessing in that way he does. "Are you nervous?"

Will considers the question, for a long time. "I don't think so," he replies. "I was, but having Chris in my corner went a long way to settling my anxiety. Even if he's not *really* okay with it, he's willing to pretend and honestly, that's okay with me." He sighs, and sips again. "We're all pretending. Kind of makes you wonder."

"Oh?"

"If he knew. About who you were. Would he still pretend he was okay with it?"

Hannibal smiles. "Likely not."

Will huffs. "Need to draw the line somewhere, I suppose."

"It's an acceptable place, I should think," Hannibal replies. "We both know the truth of the situation, but you're not wrong with what you said; I found you when you weren't even truly a person yet, and now you've agreed to marry me. To mate with me. It would be hard to convince the outside world that we both had a hand in shaping the other."

Will nods. "Sometimes I wonder," he says. "If you had taken me away as a kid. Or at sixteen, or eighteen, or twenty-one. Or the opposite – if we'd never met. If I ignored your riddles and letters and lived my life as this totally different person. But…I know it sounds crazy, I feel like we would have found each other eventually."

Hannibal's gaze softens, filled with so much affection and love that Will's cheeks turn pink and warm. He smiles into his coffee, and takes another sip. "Does that sound crazy to you?"

"Not at all, darling," Hannibal breathes. Beneath the table, their feet brush. "I would not call it something as simple as destiny, but I believe this mad world we live in follows certain

rules. Certain events simply must happen, no matter the multitudes of decisions and variables that would change the course of history. We are, as you said, impossible. Impossibility, improbability, is the only constant we can claim, and yet I found you, and you found me."

He smiles. "I think we would have, again and again and again. No matter what."

"I'd like to think that too," Will replies, feeling warm and loved under the weight of Hannibal's gaze. He lifts his mug in a salute. "To sheer impossibility, and all that comes with it."

Hannibal's smile widens, and he nods. "Well said," he murmurs, and laughs softly. "Now eat your breakfast. I meant what I said about keeping you all to myself today. I missed you terribly during the festival, despite the pleasurable diversions."

Will smiles, tilts his head to show his bitten neck, lashes going low as the red in Hannibal's eyes thickens and flares. "I missed you too," he replies, makes his voice soft, and breathy. Hannibal's eyes darken, and his fingers tighten around his fork.

He growls, and Will's smile widens. "Eat, you terrible, tempting thing," he whispers, soft with promise. Will winks at him, sets his coffee down, and hastens to obey.

Chapter End Notes

/whispers/ Hannibal and Will both have language/accent kinks thanks for coming to my TED Talk.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> my kinks may have gotten a little away from me towards the end there but it did the job of white-outing both my and luc's brain so I consider is a success.

It is on that Monday morning, after Hannibal bids him farewell and returns to Baltimore to see to his patients for the week and rearrange his appointments on Friday and the next Monday, that Will calls Alana.

She doesn't answer, so he leaves her a voicemail, and busies himself with finishing raking the rest of the yard, since he didn't get around to it between the last time he tried and the festival. It's like he never made the effort in the first place – the leaves have fallen thick and wet on the ground, clumping together in a way that makes it easier to rake, and he makes two huge piles, one for Winston and one for Addy.

By the time he's done, it's the mid-afternoon, and he slogs back inside as his dogs play in the leaves, shedding his clothes as he goes, and heads up to the shower. He aches in the most delicious way – Hannibal made good on his promise, and Sunday was filled with Hannibal mounting him sweet and warm, Will taking knot after knot until he couldn't stand without feeling Hannibal's come leaking out of him. His neck is bruised and bitten freshly, his shoulders bearing similar marks, his hips lined with crescent-shaped nail-lines, his thighs welted from Hannibal's teeth.

He smiles at himself as he cleans off, knowing Hannibal is not without his own marks; Will had been sure to sinks his nails and teeth into his mate as often as he was able, wanting Hannibal to know with no uncertainty that Will is his, and Hannibal is Will's – that Will is a good mate, as strong and vibrant as the other Alpha, and gives as good as he gets.

He gets out of the shower once he's clean, and curses when he hears his phone ring. He wraps a towel around his waist, still-dripping, and hurries to his bedroom where he left his phone, answering it right before it goes to voicemail.

"Hey," he says. "Sorry, I was in the shower."

"No worries," Alana replies. She sounds tired – jetlag is probably kicking her ass right now. Unlike Will, during their college years, Alana slept enough for the both of them. She's the kind of person that, despite her outward appearance to the world, her fierce drive and commanding presence, would just as happily curl up on the couch in her pajamas and watch T.V. all day. She probably didn't answer earlier because she was still asleep.

They are silent, for a while, and then Will exhales heavily. "So," he says.

"I think I know the answer," Alana says, warmly, even if Will can hear the disappointment in her voice. "I meant what I said, Will, it was just an offer. And you're saying 'No', right?"

"Right," Will replies. "I just…. Yeah. I can't."

"It's alright," Alana murmurs. Then, she yawns, loudly, and Will's lips twitch in a smile.

"You know, Hannibal *was* a doctor. He might be able to get you a referral somewhere good, or something, to find someone else's…what did you call it? 'Baby-making juice'?"

"I hate you," Alana huffs without much heat. Will's smile widens, and he lifts his head when he hears a knock on the door. He presses his lips together, and heads towards it.

"Love you too. I gotta go, there's someone at the door. Talk later?"

"Sure," Alana says, and she sounds like she's halfway back to the land of Nod already. Will smiles, and ends the call, setting his phone down on the dining room table, and opens the door.

And realizes about a second into doing it that he's still just wearing a towel.

He freezes, and puts his body behind the door, poking his head out, and presses his lips together when he sees it's Elijah at the door. At his side is Wally, holding his grandson's hand as they blink at him, as though similarly surprised to find Will with wet hair, flushed from the shower. Will supposes it's not the normal time of day to have one, and his cheeks darken in nervous embarrassment.

"Hey," he says. "Sorry, just got out of the shower. What's up?"

"Um." Elijah's eyes rake down from his face, to his bared shoulder, but dart back up before they can go lower, even though Will is keeping as much of his body hidden behind the door as he can. "I know this is really last minute, but I was wondering if you could watch Wally for the day? I have a few doctor's appointments and Molly is out fishing, I don't want to leave him alone in the house."

Will nods in understanding, and doesn't know whether he's more shocked or pleased that Elijah would consider him for babysitting duty. Of course, Will is the white knight of the town; he ended the legacy of the monster here, he brought peace. And, Will remembers with a wince, he did offer, in exchange for Elijah watching his dogs while he chased and hunted his mate.

"Oh, yeah, of course! Let me get dressed, come on in, make yourself at home," Will says, stepping quickly back from the door and making sure his towel is hiding anything kids shouldn't see. He can't hide his bitten shoulders and neck, nor the marks in his flanks and hips, and his back isn't any less covered than his chest. "I'll be right back!"

"Thanks, Will," Elijah murmurs. Will feels his eyes on him as he darts up the stairs, into his bedroom, and closes the door. He sweeps the towel through his hair quickly, pulls on

underwear, jeans, and a long-sleeved shirt, a dark green, and runs his hands through his hair to try and shake off any lingering drips as he heads back downstairs.

"There we go," he says, feeling much more relaxed now that he's clothed, and Elijah smiles at him, as sweet and warm as he always does. Will rubs his right hand over his left wrist, where the old welts are, and huffs a sheepish laugh. "Sorry again. But yeah, of course, I can watch him."

His eyes lower to Wally. The kid is short for his age – Will guesses he's around eight years old, but barely comes to Will's hip. He's got the bearing of an Alpha in him, when he lifts his head and stares openly at Will from beneath his flat, blondish hair. He's got Molly's nose, which is John's nose, and Elijah's pretty blue eyes, and the rest is all his mother. Will wonders, absently, what his father even looked like, because he can't see anything in the boy that doesn't come from Molly's line.

Elijah gives him a grateful smile, and releases Wally's hand, putting a hand on his head. "Thank you so much," he says. "I should be back before, maybe nine, if that's alright?"

"Sure," Will replies with a shrug. It's not like he has anything else planned for the day – Hannibal will be in Baltimore until Thursday night; they agreed Hannibal would come spend the night with Will, before they journeyed back to Baltimore in the morning.

"Thank you so much," Elijah says again with a wide smile. "Alright. You both have my phone number, and Molly's." He smiles down at Wally, and gives him another affectionate touch, stroking through his hair. "Be good."

Wally nods, and smiles, embracing his grandmother tightly, before they part. Elijah purrs gently, smiling at both of them, and then leaves. Will follows to let him out and close the door behind him.

He turns back to Wally, finds him standing like a single stick jutting from a river, awkward and all angles. Will presses his lips together, and rolls his shoulders, mentally preparing himself for spending so much time on his own with a kid he barely knows. He's never been particularly paternal, and will be the first to admit his feelings regarding children are complicated at best, but he'll try, because Elijah asked him to.

"Don't you have dogs?" Wally asks.

Will smiles. "Yeah," he says, and opens the kitchen door. Winston and Addy barrel out, covered in mud, snuffling curiously at Wally. The boy smiles, crouching down to pet their heads and ears as they woof and nuzzle him. "I was actually going to take them for a walk, would you like to join me?"

"Sure!" Wally says, and Will nods, going back upstairs to grab a pair of socks, and then returning to the front door for his shoes and coat. He dons both, checks for his wallet and keys, and opens the door for Wally, Winston, and Addy, letting them all out first.

"Hey!" he calls to the dogs, as they run towards the road. He clicks his tongue, tilts his head, and Winston and Addy grin at him, tails wagging wildly as they circle the house, walking

through the freshly-raked field. Wally keeps step with him well, and Will puts his hands into the pockets of his coat, pulling it tight around him to ward off the chill.

"Where's Hannibal?" Wally asks, after a few moments of silence.

Will smiles at him. "He works in Baltimore during the week."

Wally frowns up at him. His head tilts. "Don't you miss him?"

"Of course," Will sighs. "But sometimes being with someone means you don't get to see them all the time."

Wally nods, considering this. "My dad would take a lot of trips when I was a kid," he says, and Will resists the urge to tell him he's still a child. He presses his lips together as they walk the edges of the field, bordering the forest. The air clings to them, humid yet cold, and Will runs a hand through his hair. "That's why they got divorced, at least that's what my mom says. One day he left and just never came back."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Will murmurs. "I never knew my father."

Wally nods, and turns his head, looking over his shoulder towards the house. "Neither did my mom," he says. "He died before she was born. In that house."

Will nods, knowing this, of course.

"Grandma told me you knew him."

Will nods again, and with a small smile, he sees a flicker of shadow beside him. It's John, as he appeared as a teenager, swinging his arms and nudging his toes through the grass. "I did," he says. "When I was about your age."

"What was he like?"

Will's smile softens, and in his mind's eye, John circles Will and goes to his grandson, pets through his hair, though of course John is merely a memory, and cannot touch like the living can. "He was awesome," Will breathes. Wally looks up at him with his big, bright eyes, wide and focused on Will's face. "He treated me like a little brother. Your grandmother did, too."

Wally sighs. "He doesn't talk much about him," he says. "No one does. It's like he never even existed."

"If he didn't, you wouldn't be here," Will replies with a sad smile. "And truthfully, neither would I. His death was a terrible tragedy, but if it hadn't happened, I never would have tried to find his killer. I'd have never come back here, and met you." His smile widens when Wally looks up at him. "I'm glad I met you, Wally. And your mom. You're good people."

Wally grins, widely. He's missing a few teeth, the nubs of them just growing back in to replace the baby ones he lost.

They walk for a while longer, until they approach the nettle-clad gate that leads to the path into the woods. Will shivers, old memories and fresh ones rearing up in him; when he was a child, crawling through the forest to the letterbox to leave his answer to the first riddle; when he was older, coming back to that place. The day he took the letterbox and nailed it to his door, and cut down the tree. The day he led Hannibal on that wild chase.

"Do you like fishing, Wally?" he asks, thinking of the lake.

"Mom's taken me on the boat a few times, but we've never fished," he replies.

Will hums, nodding. "You wanna?" he asks, and smiles down at the boy. "I have some gear in my house – we can go to the lake and see what we catch. Maybe something to make for dinner."

After all, he's not going to feed this sweet, innocent child Will's regular diet.

"Sure!" Wally says, his eyes lighting up in eagerness. God, did Will ever look like that, so young and little and thirsty for the knowledge of the world? He must have, he thinks; a bright, tiny flame just waiting to be given food and air, until it roars.

"Cool," he says, and takes Wally's hand, clicking his tongue to summon Winston and Addy back to them. John laughs, at his side, and disappears with a wink, as they head back to the house. Will grabs two fishing rods, his box of bait and tackle, and a cooler, and shoulders the rods and bait box. He lets Wally carry the cooler.

They all journey back to the lake. There is a little stream leading into it, that Will takes Wally to, and they sit on the damp riverbank as he shows Wally how to tie the line to the lures, how to run them through the rods and into the reel.

"Before you cast the line, name the lure after someone you cherish."

Wally blinks up at him. "Why?" he asks.

"It's an old superstition," Will says with a smile. "If the person you named the lure for loves you back, cherishes you in return, you'll catch the fish."

Wally nods, pressing his lips together, and stands on the edge of the bank, tossing the lure in. It doesn't go far – he's small and doesn't have the strength or experience to know how to really let it fly – but it lands with a 'plop' in the still lake, and Will smiles, casting his own.

"What did you name yours?" Wally asks.

"Hannibal," Will replies, though that's not quite true. He has always named his lures 'Shadow Man'. "He's never let me down. You?"

Wally smiles. "My mom."

"Then I think we'll catch a lot of fish today."

They do. One out of three of Wally's catches are big enough to use for meat, and they toss the others back. Will catches four of his own, and places the fish in the cooler he brought, so that he can gut and prepare them at the house. Wally is grinning brightly, a skip in his step at a job well-done, as they walk with the dogs back to the house.

Will tilts his head, when he sees Molly's car parked beside his at the front of the house. She's sitting on the porch, looking at her phone, and looks up when Winston and Addy give barks of greeting, tails wagging as she grins at them, and stands.

"Mama!" Wally cries, and flings himself into her arms.

"Hey!" she says with a huff, winded at the sudden butt of his shoulder to her stomach. She pets both hands through his hair, and smiles at Will. "Where've you boys been?"

"Will took me fishing!" Wally says. "I caught three, but we tossed two back because they were too small."

Will smiles. "We have to let them get bigger," he says, and wonders if that was what stayed Hannibal's hand for so long; Will was too young, too small, not-yet fully-formed. Of course Hannibal would have tossed him back, if he caught Will too early.

"There's enough for you, if you'd like to stay for dinner," Will offers. "I thought Elijah would pick him up; assumed I might have to feed him."

"Dinner sounds great," Molly says brightly, and Will nods, leading them into the house. He offers Molly coffee, and brews enough for both of them, and Wally sips on a glass of orange juice as Will takes the fish to the kitchen, splaying them out on the counter. He takes his filleting knife and begins his work, idly tossing the entrails to the dogs as they nose at him.

Molly lingers in the doorway, shoulder to the frame, cup cradled in both hands. She sips at her coffee, watching him work – Will has always been meticulous and efficient with cleaning and gutting his fish, a practice as old as his conscious thought, and he works quickly, and preheats the oven so that they can bake.

"You fish a lot, Will?" she asks.

Will lifts a shoulder. "Fishing calms me down," he says.

"Are you not calm?" she asks with a raised brow.

"That's not it at all," he replies with a smile. "Just…. When I was a kid, I had a lot of anxiety, so I would go out fishing. With my mother, and my cousins, and then on my own when I moved away. So I got good at it."

She nods. "I get that," she says, and sips at her coffee again, watching as he coats the fish skins with rosemary and lemon juice, and places them on a large iron sheet. He only makes three of the five, for now, and wraps the others, putting them in the freezer.

The silence feels, not exactly uncomfortable, but charged in a way that sends prickles down Will's spine. He resists the urge to look at her.

"Hey, Will?"

Will casts his eyes sideways, looks at her hands.

"When did you realize you were gay?"

Will's hands still, and after a moment, he presses his lips together and closes the oven door. "Honestly? I couldn't tell you," he replies, and that is the truth – the moment he knew he was in love with Shadow Man, it didn't matter if he was Omega, or Alpha, or anything else. "I don't think I was really much of anything, until Hannibal."

She hums, pressing her lips together, her eyes sharp on his face when he lifts his gaze. He tilts his head. "Penny for your thoughts?" he asks weakly, trying to smile.

"Oh, it's nothing, just…" She sighs, and looks down at her coffee. "My family have kind of a bad string of luck when it comes to Alphas."

Will huffs through his nose. "It's a pretty sudden life change, to write them off entirely," he says, and isn't sure if he's even joking. "You can't fake who you're attracted to, or bury it." She nods again. "Wally told me about his father."

She lifts a shoulder. "We just grew apart," she says with a toss of her head. She looks over her shoulder to make sure Wally can't hear her, and then leans in, lowering her voice, "Sometimes I wonder if I really was in love with him, or if I got married and pregnant because that's what you're expected to do."

Will winces inwardly. "Not the same thing, but I sympathize," he murmurs. "My best friend was always on my case about dating, and getting mated, starting a family. Now she's even worse since she got hitched."

"To an Alpha?"

He shakes his head. "A woman."

Molly frowns. "How does that work?"

Will looks at her.

"Not *that*," she says, cheeks coloring a pale pink, a sheepish smile coming to her face. "I mean…babies. Two women can't make babies."

Will sighs, and nods. "I think she's going to get a sperm donor." Well, he knows she's going to get a sperm donor. Why does everyone want to talk about children all of a sudden? There must be something in the water.

Molly hums. "I think I'd like another kid, one day," she says idly, and looks at Will in a way that makes him feel strange. Uncomfortable, almost. "But the rest? Forget it. I don't need anyone helping me taking care of my children."

Will smiles, and lets out the breath he was holding. "I don't think you do either," he says with a smile.

She grins back at him, and Will goes to the fridge, taking out the leftover rice he had made earlier that week, and unwraps the Clingfilm from it, dishing it onto three plates and putting the first in the microwave.

"Well, if she finds a good agency, I'll be sure to pass on the information," he says. Molly laughs, rolling her eyes playfully, and Will's attention is caught by the sound of his phone ringing upstairs. He washes his hands and passes her with an apologetic smile, rushing up the stairs and finding his phone. It goes to voicemail before he can reach it, and his gut clenches up tightly when he realizes it was Hannibal, and that there are several missed calls from him throughout the day.

He calls back immediately, blowing out a breath when Hannibal answers. "Hello, darling," he purrs, and Will smiles, running a hand through his hair, as he kicks off his shoes and socks and finally sheds his jacket in his room. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm good – sorry. Elijah left Wally with me for the day and I took him out fishing. Left my phone here."

Hannibal makes a quiet, understanding sound. "Were the fish hungry?" he asks.

Will hums in agreement. "Very. We caught seven in all. Kept five."

Hannibal's purr is soft, and Will can tell he's smiling.

"Was there something you needed to talk about?" Will asks, lingering in his room, because if something should come up that he doesn't want other people hearing, he doesn't want to be running up and down his stairs to hide it. He can hear Molly and Wally shuffling around, probably petting the dogs as they wait for the fish to cook.

"I called Alana, after I arrived. We spoke for a while, about her offer to you and our decision. I leant her my insight." Will frowns. "You're both right, of course – Mason is in no physical condition to make children the natural way, but there are plenty of ways to harvest sperm that don't require a man's…full participation."

Will's frown deepens. "…I guess," he replies quietly. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I simply wanted to put your mind at ease, and assure you our friend was being taken care of," Hannibal replies, purring again. "It occurred to me that the reason Alana asked you was because of your familiarity with each other. Perhaps she shares a similar reservation, at the idea of bearing a stranger's child."

"But Mason is family," Will finishes.

"Exactly," Hannibal says. "And known to both of them. We can only hope, if they go through with my suggestions, that the child does not inherit his biological father's temperament. Or, at least, that between the four of us, we can condition him to be as lovely as his mother."

Will huffs a laugh. "The four of us?" he repeats.

"Of course, darling; though we share the mindset that we would not allow one genetic line to be passed through another's hands, there's no reason we cannot assist in raising Alana's son. 'It takes a village', as they say."

"Honestly I'm not sure we're the greatest role models," Will says with a grin. "But," he adds before Hannibal can reply, "I appreciate it. All of it. Really. It settles me to know she has options." Hannibal lets out a quiet, pleased sound – proud, to have made Will happy.

Will sighs. He would much rather reward his mate in more physical ways, but Hannibal is an entire bay apart from him. "I miss you," he confesses, through it's been less than twelve hours since they last saw each other. His neck aches for his mate's teeth, his hands shake as though cold, wishing he could warm them on Hannibal's thighs.

"And I hunger for you, my love, terribly so," Hannibal replies softly.

Will sighs again, idly rubbing his free hand over his jaw. "I should go," he murmurs, heavy with regret. "I'm making dinner for Molly and Wally and I don't want to burn the fish."

"Go, darling. If you are present enough, we can talk when they are gone." Will smiles, and purrs in eagerness. Hannibal is possessive of Will, but never jealous – why should he be? Will's heart has always been his. He never had to suffer the same insecurity as Will did.

"I love you, Shadow Man," he whispers.

"And I love you, my daydreamer," Hannibal replies. "I'll speak with you soon."

Will nods, and ends the call, pocketing his phone so he doesn't miss another. He returns downstairs, finding Molly and Wally sitting at the table, drinking their respective drinks. Beside them, the tour guides and Will's notebook sit in a stack, and he smiles when he sees Wally reading, wide-eyed, through a book on the Louvre.

The scent of baking fish is rich in the air, and Will goes to the kitchen, swapping the microwave for another plate of rice, and checks the fish. The skin is crisping nicely, the overflowing pool of lemon juice and natural moisture from the fish bubbling on the tray.

"Dinner should be ready soon," he says, closing the oven and heating the third plate.

Molly nods, and Wally looks up, turning to look at Will over his shoulder. "This place is so cool!" he says, holding up the book. "Have you been there?"

Will smiles, and shakes his head. "No, my friend got married recently and she did a year-long tour all around Europe, and brought me back all those guides." He shrugs. "I like learning about things, even if I never go there."

"Hannibal's from Europe, isn't he?" Molly asks.

Will nods.

"Do you think he'd ever take you? For your honeymoon or something?"

Will shrugs again. "Maybe, if we can decide on a place," he says lightly. He checks the oven again as the microwave beeps for the third plate, smiles, and slides on oven mitts to take out the fish, turning the over off. He grabs a spatula and puts a fish on each plate, grabs a fork and tests the oldest warmed rice to make sure it's hot all the way through.

Then, pleased with the result, he takes the plates out and hands them each one. "More coffee?" he offers.

"I'm good, thanks, but water would be nice."

He nods, goes back for his plate and a glass of water for Molly, and set them down. Then, one last trip brings their forks, a glass of water for himself, and he sits with a sigh, and they begin to eat. After a moment, he becomes aware of how strangely domestic this whole day has been, and it makes his stomach quiver up and clench with discomfort. An Alpha's role is to provide the food, and Hannibal has always been the one to do that with a few notable exceptions – he brings the meat, he cooks, he feeds Will.

Now Will is doing it for someone else – a woman old enough to be his wife, a boy young enough to be his son.

He tries to wash the thoughts away with a drink of water, swallows when Molly nudges her fork against Wally's hand. "Put the book down and eat," she says in that firm, motherly way women talk to their children, and Wally nods, placing the book on the stack, and eats.

"If you'd like, you can borrow some of them," Will suggests. "I've read most of them already."

Wally grins at him. "Thanks!"

Molly is smiling at Will, affectionate and fond, and Will feels that aggressively tense coil in his stomach flex. He tightens his hand around his fork and tries to ignore it – Molly is just his friend. Hell, she's *Elijah's* daughter, and Will is happily mated. She shouldn't be looking at him like that.

He clings to her assertion that she doesn't want to mate again, and keeps his gaze focused on his plate. His phone feels heavy in his pocket, and he is eager for them to leave, suddenly, so that he can call Hannibal.

They eat the fish and rice in silence, and when it's done, Will stands hurriedly and clears the plates away. He doesn't know how to behave after a meal – with Hannibal, they have no desire to be away from each other, and will linger after. At his parties, his guests seem to know internally when their time with him is done. But this is Harrogate, and people tend to hang around and *talk*.

But Molly stands with a sigh, much to Will's relief, and smiles at him. "Thanks for watching Wally today, Will," she says. "I'll call my mom and make sure he knows he doesn't have to pick him up."

"Sounds good," Will says, and nods to the stack of guides. "Take whatever ones you want."

Wally grins, and grabs the top four, Will's notebook separating the rest of the stack. Will's stomach clenches again, and he tries not to look like he's dismissing them too rudely, but he can't help feel distinctly relieved when the door shuts behind them, and he hears Molly's car start, hears her turn and meet the road and drive away.

He runs his hands through his hair, down over his face, and calls Hannibal.

"Hello, darling," Hannibal murmurs, and he sounds surprised to have heard from Will so soon. "How was dinner?"

"Fine," Will says, more harshly than he'd meant to. He doesn't know what would make him feel better – except the same answer as it has always been, since he was eight years old. Shadow Man. He needs his mate. "Can I come over?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies without pause. His voice is quiet, contemplative, as if waiting for Will to give him an explanation. But Will has none to offer; he doesn't want to talk about how it felt to have Elijah's eyes rake over his bruised, bitten neck. Doesn't want to talk about how nice it had been to take Wally fishing, how domestic and *normal* they would have looked to the outside world, with Will catching and feeding his 'family'.

He doesn't like it at all. "I'll be there in an hour," he says.

Hannibal purrs to him, in that way Alphas do when they attempt to soothe. "Be safe, my love," he replies, and Will nods, and ends the call. He checks Winston and Addy's food and water bowls, takes them out one more time, and then locks them in the house, pulls his shoes and socks back on, and folds his jacket over his arm.

He pats his pockets for his wallet, keys, and phone, and hurries to the car.

Hannibal's home is a warm beacon in the darkness, as Will finds a parking spot and kills the engine, hurrying out with his shoulders drawn up. He goes to the door and opens it, smiling when he finds it unlocked, and sheds his shoes and jacket, placing them in the coat closet, and locks the door behind him.

Hannibal emerges from the entrance to the dining room, tall and warm and smiling, and Will cannot name the move he makes as anything other than a lunge, as he goes to his mate and wraps his hands in Hannibal's hair, kissing him deeply.

Hannibal lets out a sound – a startled, but undeniably pleased purr, and embraces Will loosely around his waist. He parts his lips, letting Will licks between his teeth, and Will is sure his mouth stinks of fish, but Hannibal doesn't protest. He tastes of sweet blackberry wine; beneath it all, salted caramel and paper and warm leather.

They part from each other with soft gasps, and Will nuzzles impatiently at his neck, pawing down his shoulders. "My love," Hannibal says with a laugh, "are you alright?"

"No," Will replies. "But I'm getting there. Stay still."

Hannibal's purr is gentle, as he tilts his head and exposes his neck so Will can fit his teeth to the upper ridge of one of his bites, just barely visible over the line of his shirt collar. He turns Hannibal and presses him to the wall, rutting up against him until there is no piece of his mate, nor a piece of himself, that isn't coated with the scent of each other.

Hannibal sighs, running a hand through Will's hair, petting him as Will nuzzles and licks over his neck, breathes out heavily. He doesn't know what he intended to say on his drive over, but now that he's here, he can think of nothing else;

"I want to stay here for the week," he growls. "I'll get Elijah to watch the dogs. I don't want to leave you."

Hannibal shivers, his scent sparking with another wave of joy, pulse galloping beneath Will's lips. "Then stay," he breathes, as if it's as easy as that – and it is, it is that easy. The only reason they don't live together is because Will didn't want to return to Baltimore, and Hannibal can't just uproot, right now, as they are. But Will can stay, just for a little while.

He smiles, finally settling as Hannibal pets over his shoulders, harsh enough that the bruises and bites there light up beneath his touch. He lifts his head, cups Hannibal's face and kisses him again, the urgency in him turning sweeter now, swooping low.

"Shadow Man," he whispers, and watches the red in Hannibal's eyes thicken and shine, watches his nostrils flare. "I want to pretend again."

Hannibal smiles, showing his teeth, and kisses Will passionately. Will returns it, moaning weakly as Hannibal pushes himself from the wall, Will following in a clumsy stumble as Hannibal guides him to the stairs, and up them, to his bedroom.

Will remembers this room, from the time he came here while Hannibal was away, touched himself and spread his scent, and though he has scarcely been here since, he can smell himself, like the very air clings to his memory. Wonders if, perhaps, this is a room of Hannibal's mind palace, where Will always lingers.

Hannibal growls at him, pushes at Will's shirt and tugs it over his head until his chest is bare, and Will sets his teeth to his mate's shoulder, fumbles with his vest and the buttons of his shirt, snarling with impatience until the fabric finally gives, and parts, and he can run his hands over Hannibal's chest.

Despite the characters being wrong, the play itself had lit something in him – the idea of hunting for Hannibal, providing for him, feeding him and then breeding him is a desire rising up in him sharply. He snarls, as Hannibal does, and takes his mate's hands so that, for a moment, they are frozen, breathing heavily and soaking in each other's scents.

"I want you to play Omega, tonight," he says.

Hannibal's eyes flash, bright and curious, and then darken so suddenly they are only black and red. Abruptly, his demeanor changes, melts and softens as Will has so often for him in their bed. He lets out a sweet, plaintive whine, lowers his shoulders and his head, touches his lips to Will's scruffy jaw.

"Just Omega?" he whispers, so low Will shivers with it. "Or shall I be your daydreamer, as well?"

Will freezes. *Oh*. He lifts his head, meets his mate's eyes, panting so heavily he might never catch enough air again. His fingers tremble, and tighten, on Hannibal's chest. Playing Omega is one thing, pretending they can breed each other is something they've done before.

But being Shadow Man? Having that power, that mindset, sitting in his skull when he mounts his mate?

Will knows from experience his behavior playing the hunter is not like Hannibal's – he is too impatient, too unseasoned, too desperate to maintain that kind of restraint. But…. But what if he were the older one, the stronger one, for real? He wouldn't have waited until Hannibal was in his thirties. The night he came to his sweet mate's side, found him blindfolded and trusting and knowing exactly why he killed John in his youth, he wouldn't have stopped at just a kiss.

He would have claimed Hannibal in every way he could, knowing his mate was just as eager for him.

Hannibal smiles at him, sweet and warm, eyes low-lidded as he lets out a quiet purr, cups Will's nape, and kisses the corner of his mouth. Even that touch, light though it is, makes Will shake.

"Shadow Man," Hannibal whispers, and Will doesn't know what to call the sound he makes – it is something rough, a snarl and a moan, something that comes from whatever deepest place in his stomach lingers that is filled only by Hannibal's kiss. Hannibal's voice is quiet, sweet, high, like Will's was when he was younger. Hannibal takes one of Will's hands, presses it flat to his chest and slides it down, to his flank. Makes Will grip him with tight nails. "Please."

Will cannot keep still a second longer. He kisses Hannibal deeply – not Hannibal, now, no; his daydreamer. His sweet, trembling thing. It would have been different, if Will was in Hannibal's place. He swallows harshly, guides Hannibal towards the bed, pawing at the rest of his clothes until Hannibal is bare for him.

He smiles, and wonders if Hannibal felt this strong the first night they laid with each other. The look in Hannibal's eyes is worshipful, soft with adoration. His lips, full from Will's kiss, a deep red that matches the growing flush on his chest and the fullness of his cock.

Will pushes him to sit, and stands between his knees. Leans down, and kisses him, petting through his hair.

"My sweet mate," he says, and lets his accent come out, lets himself drawl the words and notes with pleasure as Hannibal's entire body quivers. Will, if he were Shadow Man, wouldn't talk like a refined, Blue-Blooded man. No, he'd slur and smile and make his daydreamer

think of wild woods in the South, of fireflies and hummingbirds and quiet lakes where alligators dwell.

Hannibal looks up at him, tilts his face into Will's hands, shivers and cups his fingers around Will's wrists as Will so-often does when Hannibal touches him the same way. How strange, how delightful, that Hannibal can mimic him as easily as this. The scent of Hannibal's arousal is warm, thrums in Will's lungs and his throat, and he growls, pushing gently at Hannibal's shoulders. "Let me see you, darlin'."

Hannibal's lips part on a gasp, his cock twitching and leaking on his thigh as he nods, and pulls back, pushing himself up so he lies in the center of his bed like a feast, all Will's for the taking. Will's smile widens, grows off-kilter, showing his teeth, and he sheds the rest of his clothes because he might die if he doesn't get inside Hannibal soon.

This feels like rut, almost, but headier than that. The burn of whiskey instead of wine. Will prowls into place between Hannibal's thighs, rears over him and kisses him deeply, a hand on Hannibal's neck because that's how Shadow Man touches. His other hand, on Hannibal's hip, because that's how Will gets held when they mate.

The mental shift inside him is welcome, eagerly-taken. He cannot look at his mate and think of words like 'powerful' and 'strong', though Hannibal is still, undeniably, both those things. No, now his brain gives him words like 'sweet', 'gentle', 'eager'. Makes him snarl when Hannibal's thighs grip him, and Hannibal's hands are gentle on his bruised and bitten back, fluttering weakly like he can't decide where to touch.

In Hannibal's false indecision, Will's own confidence grows, and he pulls back and noses Hannibal's neck, sets his teeth to the outline of his long-scarred first bite, and reopens it with another growl. Hannibal moans, tilts his head up and away to give Will all the room he desires, his hips jerking up to grind against Will, their cocks rutting together warm and slick.

It's wonderful, and Will knows he could come just like this, but he has grander designs.

He wets his teeth with Hannibal's blood, purring loudly at the sweet taste of caramel, coating his tongue thickly, and drags his nose up the tense tendon in Hannibal's neck, licks wide and warm over it as Hannibal trembles and whines. *Oh*, God, that's a beautiful sound.

"That's it, baby," Will murmurs, because that's what he'd call Hannibal, if he had been Shadow Man all along. 'Darlin' and 'Sweetheart' and this, all the time. He can see why Hannibal loves pet names so much; every one Will gives him makes him shiver. "You're mine after tonight. In every way."

Hannibal nods, and lets out another weak noise. He's the impatient one, now, rolling his hips up so their bodies rut together, digging in with blunt nails to Will's flanks, urging him in, *in*, deeper. Will lifts his eyes when Hannibal turns his head, and their kiss has teeth, loud snarls muffled against each other.

"Waited years for this, darlin'," Will breathes, and his eyes burn with red, his chest feels too tight – he's holding too much inside himself, and must give it to Hannibal. Has to fill his daydreamer until he bursts with it. His purr is loud, for he cannot contain it, and he smiles

when Hannibal licks a smear of his own blood from his lip. "You ever let an Alpha fuck you before?"

Hannibal's eyes are so black, even the red of them is too dark to see. He swallows, and shakes his head. Breathes out; "No, Shadow Man. I've only ever wanted you."

Will closes his eyes, a heavy shudder rolling through him. "Good," he purrs, and touches their noses together. Remembers the first night Hannibal touched him like this, when *Shadow Man* touched him like this, and it's a fierce and diamond-sharp thing, burned into the backs of his eyelids. He clings to his altered accent, growls the words; "Gotta get you all slick for me, baby. You have anythin' that'll help?"

Hannibal trembles for him, whines softly, and nods, tilting his chin to the bedside drawers. Will smiles, and parts from him with one more kiss.

"Get on your hands and knees, sweetheart," he murmurs, petting through Hannibal's hair, before he rises from the bed to fetch the bottle of lubricant. It's unopened – they usually use Will's, at his house. He unwraps the plastic cover and opens it, wetting his fingers, and when he returns, is proud to see Hannibal has obeyed him, his hips raised and his knees spread, baring himself to Will's greedy gaze.

Will shivers, kneeling between his legs, and bites his lower lip as he brushes his wet fingers over Hannibal's tight, dry hole. He leans over Hannibal, kisses open and wet on his broad shoulders, reaches below him to gently stroke his cock. He shivers, growling low when he finds Hannibal's knot is already semi-swollen, so eager and sweet, his beautiful mate.

He curls his fingers, slides one into Hannibal, snarling when he's let in, a wanton sound spilling from Hannibal's lips. He rolls his shoulders into Will's mouth, arches up in a silent plea, and Will pushes in deep, adds a second mere moments after, seeking that sensitive place in his daydreamer that will make him see stars.

He sighs, aching, raw on the inside, and whispers; "I wish I could look at you when I claim you, darlin', but I gotta do it this way." Hannibal whines. "Gonna plant a seed in you, watch it grow."

He lets go of Hannibal's cock, presses his hand to Hannibal's belly. They both let out loud, wanton snarls at that.

"Gonna make sure the whole damn world knows you're mine."

"Please," Hannibal begs, throaty and rough, and tilts his head to show Will the redness of his cheek, his black eyes, his parted lips. Does Hannibal feel this way, when Will begs for him? He must, he must, for there's no way to feel anything else – Shadow Man is in his head, guiding his hands as he has guided Will his entire life, a monstrous, shapeless presence that floods him and blinds him to all else but Hannibal, pinned below him.

He parts his teeth with another snarl, sinks them into Hannibal's strong shoulder, and pulls his fingers out, rubbing the rest of the lubricant on his cock. His nails find Hannibal's hips,

holding him steady. He rolls his back up, knees forward, and angles Hannibal so that his cockhead catches on his rim, and sinks in.

Hannibal moans, loudly, pushing back onto Will so the first thrust is easy and fast, Will piercing through Hannibal's spasming muscles as Hannibal clamps down tight around him. Will lets out another sound not quite human – all animal, all beast. He slides his hands up Hannibal's flanks and pushes at his shoulders, putting his chest to the sheets, and for a moment merely lingers there, shuddering and sweaty, soaking in the feeling of Hannibal taking him all the way.

They've done this before, of course they have, but never like this; never with Will playing this role, and Hannibal playing his part. The actors and characters have shifted course, and this is something brand new, and it feels new, like it's their first time all over again.

Will isn't going to last long, he knows that; his knot is already trying to swell and his orgasm is biting fiercely at him, as harshly as he bites Hannibal, splitting skin with ragged moans as he fucks his mate. The force of his thrusts makes Hannibal's thighs tremble, makes him collapse with another weak, wanton noise – so eager, so sweet, *God*, Will loves him so much he can't see past it.

He has to say it, so he does; parts his teeth from Hannibal's skin, licks through the blood, puts his mouth to Hannibal's ear. "You're mine," he growls, and Hannibal's entire body clenches up, rocking back, making Will drive deeper, harder, their bodies colliding in an obscene chorus beneath their gasps and moans. "Forever. Say it."

"I am," Hannibal says, and he sounds more like himself now, but that doesn't make the words any less ragged, any less true. He reaches back and puts a hand over Will's, where they have found their place on his chest, over his racing heart. Will clings to him, covers him, knees and feet dug into the mattress as he tries to force himself in deeper – he wants to find that cavernous place in Hannibal that Hannibal made in Will, seeks in an instinct all Alpha to find the slick opening of an Omega, to find where he can plant his seed and breed his mate.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, and Will's eyes squeeze tightly shut. "Let go, Shadow Man. Claim me."

"Oh, *God*." Will is helpless to resist, because Hannibal is using his Voice – something he's never done. Daydreamer has a Voice, daydreamer is the one to use it.

Well, Will isn't the daydreamer tonight.

He can't resist it, even if he wanted to – he fucks forward hard enough to push Hannibal to his belly, clings tightly to him and forces his knot inside, coming with a heavy snarl as his knot swells, flooding his mate's hot, tight body. Hannibal trembles beneath him, panting, his growl discordant from suddenly using his Voice, when he has never needed to, for Will.

"Oh my God," Will breathes, nuzzling Hannibal's sweaty, shining skin. "Do that – do that again. *Please*, baby."

Hannibal shivers, and lifts his head, turning and nuzzling Will's hair. He breathes out shakily, and guides Will's hand down between his belly and the sheets, making him wrap his hand around his leaking cock. "Touch me," he says, Voice powerful, vibrating to Will's spine. His body twitches, working his knot in short thrusts to get pressure against Hannibal's prostate.

Will slides his other hand up to Hannibal's throat, cups there gently, tilts his head to kiss him as Hannibal does when he gets Will like this. It's a raw, breathy thing, both of them too robbed of air to make it last, and Will strokes Hannibal slowly, dragging his orgasm out piece by piece.

Hannibal's eyes are all-black, his nostrils flared, tongue slick when he licks over Will's jaw. "You feel wonderful, Shadow Man," he breathes, and Will trembles above him, gasps and buries his face in Hannibal's neck, wanting to bite. "*Yes*." Hannibal bares his nape, lets Will put his teeth there, lets him bite down as Hannibal's entire body spasms and tenses up around him. He feels the tell-tale pressure of Hannibal's orgasm, squeezing his knot, making Hannibal's cock twitch in his hand, so close. Will sinks his teeth in, doesn't split skin, but threatens it, and it's like that, pinned and helpless and weak with relief below Will, that Hannibal comes.

Will keeps touching him through it, dragging it out for him as Hannibal's body greedily grips his knot, forcing more come out of Will in turn. He groans, licks over the newest bite, nuzzles Hannibal's sweaty hair and tries to catch his damn breath.

But each inhale holds Hannibal; his scent, his blood, the rush of his pulse and the sound of his heavy, sated moans. If this is how Shadow Man feels all the time they mate, Will can see why he needs it so often, and so much. It's addictive, rushes through him like the high of a hunt, like rut all over again.

Will lets go of Hannibal's cock, wraps his arms around his chest, and settles, not fighting the urge to cover and hide his mate away from prying eyes.

Hannibal sighs, sensing the change in disposition, and in Will's mind's eye, he sees a man of gold pass his crown back to the man of shadow, and he is once again just Will. Just daydreamer.

He breathes out, heavily, shaken to the core. "Is that how you feel?" he whispers, clears his throat and corrects his voice back to his normal accent, softened and conditioned to something lacking drawl.

Hannibal understands what he means. He nods; "I need merely think of you."

Will smiles. His body pulses with another fresh wave of satisfaction, and he shakes, lapping idly at Hannibal's bites and bruises, watching the skin darken and purple along the edges, coloring his golden skin.

"Thank you for showing me," he says.

Hannibal smiles, and turns his head, and kisses Will deeply. He doesn't answer, merely folds his hands around Will's, sweaty and streaked with his own seed, and they settle together like

that, sated and lax. When Will's knot goes down, he doesn't pull away, merely lets himself be warmed and braced against his mate, and only moves to pull an edge of the duvet over them to keep them warm.

Hannibal hums, smiles, and kisses him again, content to lay there, it seems, with Will covering him. Will nuzzles his nape, kisses the bruises, and wraps his arms around Hannibal all the more tightly.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the long wait on this one! Work is killing me and DDSM takes a very specific mindset for me to write it well. Enjoy!

Will wakes in Hannibal's bed, sighing quietly as he rolls onto his side, finds Hannibal's chest, his pulse, and nuzzles there lazily. Hannibal's hand immediately finds his hair, petting it back from his face – his pulse does not quicken. He was already awake.

"Good morning, Will," he says, and his voice is rough from last night, from snarling and howling for Will as Will took him, again and again and again. Until his teeth felt gentle enough to keep in his own mouth, until the aggravating, persistent buzz of discomfort that came from the day before had faded away, soothed by Hannibal's touch, and allowed him to sleep.

Will sighs, happy to let himself be petted as he pushes Hannibal so he's lying on his back, Will's cheek on his chest, fingers idly scratching through the streaks of dried come on his belly. Hannibal's hand is strong, dragging through his hair, nails scratching pleasantly.

"I think there's something in the water," Will murmurs after a while.

Hannibal lets out a quiet, tired-sounding hum, but Will can tell he's paying attention. He sighs again, closes his eyes, lets himself listen, for just a moment, to no other sound than Hannibal's heartbeat beneath his ear, the dull roar of his blood and the steady inward draw of his breath.

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone's suddenly obsessed with babies," Will says. "Alana, Molly, even you, to an extent."

Hannibal hums again. His hand doesn't slow in Will's hair. "There's a theory in psychology that says a person tends to notice the thing he's thinking about more. You are thinking about a yellow car, you will notice them more often – thinking about politics, or war, or a scandal, you are sure to see it more readily than anyone else." Will huffs. "So, my love, is everyone really talking about children, or are you just so keenly aware of it that it seems so?"

Will doesn't answer.

Hannibal slides his free hand along Will's shoulder, gently petting down his arm. "You were deeply troubled when you came to me last night," he says, and Will clenches his eyes tightly shut, turns his head to push his nose flat to Hannibal's ribs. "Will you tell me why?"

Will breathes out. He wants to say 'No', but Hannibal is the cure for the poison seeping into his bloodstream – his mate is the one he sought out, as soon as he was able. He could have gone anywhere, but he came here, to a city he hates, that holds far too much history for him, because that's where Shadow Man is.

"During dinner," he begins, "Molly was asking me about kids. Told me she wanted to have another one. Looked at me like…" He stops, because Hannibal's hand has gone still. "She didn't ask – honestly I don't know if I was projecting, or just too out of balance because of all that shit with Alana, but I…*fed* them."

He breathes in, his fingers curling.

"I took a boy young enough to be my son fishing. I hunted for a woman old enough to be my wife. I sat around a little table with them and it made me feel…" He doesn't know the word. 'Happy' isn't right, because Hannibal wasn't there. 'Sated' is a good word, for Will is still an Alpha, no matter how he behaves or whom he loves, and things like protecting and providing for his pack are always going to settle him. "Strange," he finally decides on.

Hannibal hums again, his fingers curling idly through Will's hair, behind his ear, down over the bites and marks littering Will's neck. Will shivers, pressing his lips together, and turns his head, opening his eyes so he can see Hannibal's face. Hannibal isn't looking at him, but staring up at the ceiling, his face a mask of quiet contemplation.

Will rises, slides a hand up to rest gently over Hannibal's collarbone, which is red and ringed with marks from Will's teeth. Hannibal blinks, and meets his eyes, gaze sharpening as he returns from whatever place his thoughts had taken him.

He sighs, and cups Will's hand, kissing his knuckles. "I'm glad you came to me, after," he murmurs, soft, strangely vulnerable. Will's chest aches at the sound of it, and he leans down, kissing him deeply, his hand sliding to Hannibal's throat, cupping his neck to let the kiss linger.

He rests their foreheads together when he has to breathe, panting as Hannibal's hands flatten on his shoulders, petting idle strokes down his back and across his neck. "I don't like how much I liked it," Will confesses. "How much I wish I could give that to you."

Hannibal smiles, his eyes dark, soft with affection. "Will, darling, you already do," he replies. "Feeding you brings me no end of pleasure – hunting for you, and taking care of you, it has always brought me joy."

Will nods, pressing his lips together.

"Is that a need going unmet, for you?"

"I don't know," Will replies honestly. "I'm…selfish about it, I suppose. You know I'm possessive of you."

Hannibal's eyes flash, and he nods – Will proved that, during his hunt. He will not tolerate Hannibal's attention straying from him with any permanence, be it with his friends, or a child.

Will might be young enough to long for a family, might be selfish enough to find some satisfaction in raising a child with his mate, but he would not bear any kind of surrogate.

"Well," Hannibal says carefully, "perhaps, after we spend the weekend with your family, you will be able to better decide if a larger pack is something you need." He smiles, teasing and slight; "I will be supremely out of my element with them. You will have to make sure I behave properly."

Will laughs, though it's somewhat strained. "Please," he says. "As if you're not going to charm them like you do everyone else."

Hannibal smiles, and does not deny it. He leans up, stealing another chaste kiss. As it ends, his alarm goes off on the bedside table, and Will sighs, reaching over to turn it off. Hannibal sits up, his expression apologetic, and pets through Will's hair.

"I have appointments all day," he says, and sounds guilty even though Will was the one who showed up at his house and demanded to be allowed to stay. He will stay – he'll ask Elijah to check on his dogs and remain here, in his mate's home, where he won't have to worry about strangers staring at his neck or people showing up uninvited. Where he can simply be, and relax, and enjoy himself before they fly out to visit his family.

Will smiles, and rubs his cheek against Hannibal's shoulder. "I'll be alright," he promises. "Go. Heal minds. Do good work."

Hannibal smiles at him, and kisses him gently. "Come join me in the shower," he murmurs, dark and alluring, and Will grins at him, but lets Hannibal pull him to his feet, and lead him to the large master bathroom.

He has never been in Hannibal's home when Hannibal wasn't there, except for the one day while he hunted his mate, playing the role of the conqueror. Still, that event had been singular for him, with a simple purpose – in and out again like a thief in the night.

Now, though, he is free and unmonitored, to move about the place as he sees fit. He goes, first, to the kitchen, admiring the sleek shine of appliances, not a spot or smear to mar their surfaces. He's noticed Hannibal wears white a lot when he cooks, to show his mastery, since he always emerges from the kitchen totally unblemished. Not like Will, who more often than not leaves his kitchen looking like a crash site victim.

He drags his fingers along the cool countertops, opens the pantry and takes in the scents of dried spices, the sight of bottled and jarred preserves, pickles, peppers. Pureed tomatoes sealed in cans, bags of jerky, wine. Always so much wine – it's a wonder both Hannibal and Will are not constantly drunk, for how much they indulge.

He finds, in the corner, the familiar bottles like the ones Hannibal uses for his own brewing. Finds one sitting on a shelf that simply bears the name 'Will'. He smiles, and takes the bottle,

sniffing the cork – smells oranges and cinnamon seeping through the material. The bottle is black, so he doesn't know if it's a red or white wine.

He takes it out to the kitchen and sets it by the fridge – they will drink it tonight, when Hannibal comes home.

He wraps one of the dishtowels around his hand, rubbing his face idly against it, spreading his scent as Alphas are wont to do, and finds an opener in one of the drawers – next to, he notices, an impressive array of knives, separate from the ones in the block on the island. He huffs a laugh through his nose, no more than an expulsion of air, and uncorks the bottle.

It's a red, he can see the stain of it on the cork, so he sets it down and carefully wraps a small sheet of Clingfilm around the open top, and pokes a single hole in it, so that it can still breathe, but won't over-aerate. Every wine Hannibal has fed him has been wonderful, sweet and rich, and he doesn't want to ruin it.

Next, the dining room. Will leaves the cork, bottle opener, and dishtowel on the counter, and strides across the threshold separating the two rooms. How often has he sat in this space, and how many of those times after was the night so momentous? It is here that they shared their first meal, when Will knew who and what Shadow Man was, when Will came to him and heard Hannibal play his sweet music. It is here that Hannibal openly declared Will as his mate and husband to his friends. It is here that Will feels most at home – the air in the dining room thrums like a heartbeat. This is where Hannibal's house is given life. The kitchen, its lungs; the bedroom, its open eyes and panting mouth.

The study, its stomach, where Will goes next.

Hannibal's piano sits, the lid closed over the keys, the top pulled down. Will sits, and lifts the cover, sighs and brushes his fingers idly over a string of white keys, creating a somewhat disharmonious chord. He tilts his head, and tries again, finds one white key, and presses the one two above it, and the two above that.

He smiles. There is no sheet music on the stand, and Will doesn't even know how to read it if it was there. Perhaps he'll learn – that would be a nice surprise, he thinks. One that Hannibal would appreciate.

He stands, and closes the lid, running a hand through his hair and casting his eyes around the rest of the room. Takes in the couches, where he first sat with Alana, Margot, and Hannibal. When he first heard Hannibal play their song – and again, later. How often has he sat in this very space between those times, and since, exchanging words and soft looks lit by firelight, with the man and monster he has called his own? Countless, and yet the air feels new, as though each occupant within it rebirths it.

Behind the counters are bookshelves, dark and thickly packed. He goes to them, reaches out and drags his fingertips along the spines and bindings of the books. There are textbooks of anatomy, bound essays and theses regarding psychology, surgery, behavioral analysis. A book on flowers – Will smiles when he sees that.

There is another book. All the others are labeled, even the older ones with faded golden lettering, but not this one. Will tilts his head, curious, and pulls it from the shelf. It's a folio, the kind with clear sleeves in which to store documents. There are no markings on the soft leather outside, nothing on the spine or the front, nothing on the inside.

He opens it.

"I am tall when I'm young and short when I'm old. What am I?"

"A candle."

Will gasps, his eyes widening. That's his writing, too large and scrawling as he used to write when he was eight. Slanted, rushed, the paper stained with mud and watermarks. Above it, Hannibal's fine script. This is the original one, though, he's sure of it.

He turns the page.

"Two mothers and two daughters went out to eat, everyone ate one burger, yet only three burgers were eaten in all. How is this possible?"

"Grandmother, mother, daughter. I missed you, Shadow Man."

Will's hands shake, and his eyes burn, as he collapses onto the nearest couch. He runs a hand over his mouth, stifling a soft, broken sound. Each sleeve holds one of their letters – every single one accounted for. The ones Will sent back to him, with his too-heavy hand, his cheap biros from school, his handwriting getting neater and smaller as he got older.

Some of them just have Hannibal's writing on them – the ones he sent, originally, before Will could reply. None of them are timestamped, but they're written in order. Hannibal's condolences over the loss of his father. His riddle with the rainbow. He wrote two copies of each – Will wonders, a fierce ache in his chest, if he ever thought that this letter might be the last he sent. Will could have moved away, where Hannibal would not have been able to find him. He could have stopped writing back.

Hannibal kept all of them.

In the back of the book is Will's final letter to him – the one he'd written the night of their true hunt, when he'd killed and cooked for Hannibal and chased him to the lake. Neighboring it; "Why did I kill John?"

"You did it because you wanted to see what would happen."

Will closes the book, trembling and weak, his eyes burning with tears – tears of joy, of elation. Hannibal kept every single letter, just like Will did, pieced them together in a call and response that tells the tale of their meeting, their friendship, their love. A courtship, bound with leather and placed in the stomach of Hannibal's home.

He hugs the folio to his chest, breathing in shakily. He can smell Hannibal on this book – clearly he takes it out often, for there is not a speck of dust upon it. How often, Will thinks, how often did he open this and reread all the words they have exchanged over the years.

When he felt weak, when he burned with longing for Will, did he read these letters and compose his music and think of the day Will would finally become his?

His phone chimes, in his pocket, and he takes it out to find a text from Hannibal. His ears must have been burning, for Will feels like he is howling in this silence, desperate for the presence of his mate.

"I'll be coming home for lunch. Do I need to fetch you anything?"

Will smiles. He thinks he might laugh, and never stop laughing, for the elation in his chest has built up to a heavy storm, roaring with wind and thunder. His hands shake, but he manages to text back, "I'm good. I'll see you when you get here."

Then, after a moment; "I love you."

"I love you too, darling," Hannibal's text replies mere second later. "I'll see you soon."

Will is still in the study when Hannibal returns, clutching the folio, his fingers gripping it gently so he doesn't damage the old papers inside. He hears Hannibal shed his coat, hang it, and his slow, unhurried footsteps as he approaches the kitchen.

"Darling?" he calls.

"In here," Will replies, his voice hoarse.

He looks up as Hannibal's shadow eclipses the doorway. Hannibal smiles at him, taking a single step in, and pauses when he sees what Will is holding.

He swallows.

"You kept them," Will whispers. "All of them. Every single one."

Hannibal nods. "I did," he says, like the idea of doing anything else is unthinkable.

Will looks down at it, flattens it carefully over his thighs. "The night after our first dinner," he says, as Hannibal prowls closer. "Well, a few nights after that, when you kept me waiting. The night you finally came to me, I was so angry with you. I chopped down the tree where the letterbox was and burned it, and I thought about adding your letters to it."

Hannibal approaches him, silent.

"I didn't," Will murmurs, and lifts his eyes. "I burned my notes from Jack's lecture, instead. I couldn't bear to cast you aside, not yet."

Hannibal sits beside him, pressed close, and touches Will's hand gently. Will shivers, his eyes wet, his throat tight and dry. *God*, he feels like he might combust, might simply burst into

flame with how much Hannibal loves him.

"There were times when I considered the same," Hannibal confesses, and Will looks at him, finds the same fierce light shining in Hannibal's eyes, the red brilliant and dark. "But every time I did, it was like you knew, and I would receive another letter. Every time, my love for you blossomed all over again, and I knew I could not do it, no matter what."

Will swallows harshly. His fingers flex on the cover of the book, and he looks down at it again.

"We're both stubborn," he murmurs.

Hannibal smiles, and his free hand settles on the back of Will's neck. "Yes," he agrees. "Both stubborn, and willful, and I daresay, perfectly suited for each other in that regard. If we were not, we wouldn't be here."

"I don't like thinking about that possibility," Will says.

"Nor do I."

Will turns his head, sighing gently, seeking a kiss that Hannibal eagerly grants him. Will's lips part, allowing Hannibal to taste him, and he shivers as Hannibal cups his throat, presses against him desperately, a soft purr stuck in his chest that Will matches with one of his own.

He pulls back, eyes dark with adoration, and brushes his thumb gently beneath Will's lower lip. "I know I have said it so often," he murmurs, "but Will, truly – thank you. For everything. You have changed me, at my core, and I could not imagine my life now, without you by my side."

Will smiles, and Hannibal's eyes drop to the book in his lap.

"I never want to."

"Good," Will replies, and rests their foreheads together, noses brushing. "I opened one of your wine bottles, to let it air. It should be ready by now."

Hannibal smiles, and nods, rising and pulling Will to his feet. Will clutches the folio to his side, unwilling to let go of it quite yet. Hannibal notices, but doesn't react except for his smile to grow wider. "Come, darling," he purrs, and guides Will to the dining room. "I cannot stay for long."

"That's alright," Will murmurs, and kisses him before Hannibal parts from him, to go to the kitchen and fetch the wine, and whatever food he had intended to make. "I'll have you all to myself tonight."

Hannibal smiles, eyes bright with mirth and anticipation. "That you will," he says with a nod. "Sit. Let me take care of you."

Will nods, settling in his place at the left of the head of the table, and Hannibal parts from him with one more kiss, and leaves to make their meal.

At four in the afternoon, there is a knock on the door. Will frowns, rising from his place in Hannibal's study, where he had managed to find a book on music theory and was trying to learn how to read it. He sets the book down and goes to the door, peering through the peephole.

It's Jack. Will growls to himself, huffs, and opens the door.

Jack blinks at him, like he's surprised to find Will there – either he's a very good actor, or it's genuine. "Will," he says flatly, and then recovers, straightening up. "Is Hannibal here?"

"No," Will replies. "He's working."

Jack presses his lips together. There's a file in his hand.

"What do you want with him?" Will asks, when it seems like Jack isn't going to turn around and leave any time soon.

"There was another family annihilation this morning," Jack says. Will blinks at him. *Another*? "Hannibal has been helping the team out with consultations." Jack's head tilts, his dark eyes looking Will up and down, considering. "Don't suppose that would be something you're interested in?"

Will fights not to show his teeth. He's not angry that Hannibal is helping Jack – if Hannibal wants to do it, that's his business, and if it keeps Will off Jack's radar, then all the more reason to continue letting him.

His eyes drop to the folder, and he huffs. If Jack goes to Hannibal, he might be compelled to visit the scene after work, which means he and Will won't be able to spend as much time together. He holds out his hand for the file.

"Let me look."

Jack smiles, like this was his plan all along, and hands Will the file. Will turns away, walking to the dining room, and listens as Jack comes in behind him, closing the door and following Will inside. Will doesn't offer him a drink, does not extend any of the normal social niceties – that's not his job, and frankly he has no interest in being nice to Jack.

He sits and opens the folder, blinking at the summary report. Behind the report are photographs, paperclipped to stay in place.

He breathes out. Braces himself.

Turns the page.

The first photograph is of a dining room. In the center, a roast chicken, half-rotted. Each plate, holding remnants of a meal, and atop each plate is a person. Shot, point black in the

back of the head. The plate at the head of the table is empty.

The mother was shot in her forehead.

Will shivers, pressing his lips together, and swallows tightly. Shuts his eyes and rubs his hand over his face. He takes in a deep breath, hating the crawling, clinging sensation of this mindset even before it overtakes him completely.

He stands, and blinks at the dining room table, and it shifts before his eyes in a swatch of gold. Plates, rotting food, dead bodies faceplanted in their meals. He moves to the head of the table and stands behind the chair, and then pulls it out, sitting within it.

He breathes in deeply, scenting the air, can taste old meat and blood. "The table has been set," he murmurs, and casts his eyes over the scene only he can see. He thumbs at the photographs, looks down at them, and up again. "Family dinner. I wasn't invited."

He looks to the right of him, where the mother sits, staring at him with tears in her eyes. She's pretty, Will's age, and reminds him of Molly. "I take my seat at the empty plate," he says, spreading his hands out wide either side of his setting, as if it were really there. "This is my seat, my place setting, next to…" He drops his eyes, catches the name, "Missus Turner's. I'm the guest of honor."

He looks to his left, feels his face contort into something like a smile, indulgent and wide. "No one has taken a bite of their dinner, except the youngest. No one is bound…. But no one leaves the table. All afraid to move." His head tilts. "Even the little ones behaved themselves."

Beside him, Misses Turner sobs. Her eyes are bright and glassy with tears.

"I brought my family to this home invasion," Will murmurs, and sees, behind the family, shadows of people, all standing behind their assigned kill. He shivers, because when he sees them, he feels pride. "I controlled the Turners with threats of violence." His fingers curl, shift in posture like he's holding a gun. The weight of it, the feel, is intimate and familiar. Whoever orchestrated this is just as comfortable holding it as Will was, back in his youth.

He feels a spark of heat when he says; "Threats that turned to action."

He hears the gunshots, flinches from them. He looks up and meets Jack's eyes, only briefly, before he looks as each member of the family falls in turn. Jack isn't really here. Neither is Will. Did he miss this? Is this heat behind his eyes something akin to longing?

He presses his lips together.

"The Turner family is executed simultaneously, with the exception of Missus Turner. She dies last." He looks back at her, watches her cry, watches as she tries to reach out to him, and lifts his gun, pressing it to her pale skin. "I shoot Mrs. Turner, gun against the canvas of her forehead. I look her directly in the eye when I pull the trigger."

He grits his teeth, like he's fighting the urge to do it. His hand jerks and Will flinches when he does it, gasping as the gold sweeps in front of his eyes for a moment. When they refocus, the table is empty, and Will is soaked in cold sweat.

Jack steps forward. "What do you see, Will?"

Will's voice is hoarse, cracking around the edges. "Family values," he murmurs.

"Whose family values?"

Will shivers, shaking his head. He pushes himself away from the table, chair scraping, and the scent of meat and blood fades from his nose. He looks down at the photographs, tilts his head when he sees, in the first picture, a family portrait behind the head of the table.

Jack steps forward again. "They were Karen and Roger Turner. Childhood sweethearts. They owned a successful Real Estate business. Pillars of the community. Three children."

Will's eyes flash. He bares his teeth. "Minus one," he says.

Jack nods. "A son, Jesse. He disappeared last year – the last confirmed sighting had him boarding an RV at a rest area on route forty-seven. A runaway. Or an abduction."

Will cocks his head to one side. "Or both."

Jack nods, huffing. "Hundreds of tips, but not a single one held up past lunchtime. When misery rains, she pours."

Will swallows harshly, and brushes his fingers over the portrait in the photograph. "Holidays, vacations, milestones…. It never reveals the whole picture." He sighs. "But then again, who wants to fill their scrapbook with arguments and dirty laundry?" Will makes a rough, aggravated sound. "False faces in family portraits; layers and layers of lies betrayed by a sad glint in a child’s eyes."

He looks up and meets Jack's eyes. "Were there any signs of forced entry? Defensive wounds?"

Jack shakes his head. "No to the first. And all the family have defensive wounds, except Missus Turner."

Will turns to look back to the dining room, sets his eyes on the chair to his right, where she sat. "There was acceptance in her body position. Forgiveness, even."

"What kind of victim forgives her killer at the moment of her death?" Jack asks, brows rising.

"A mother," Will says, and knows as soon as he says it that it's true. He closes the folder, stands, and hands it to Jack. Jack takes it, his eyes dark, brow lowered in a severe frown. "Jesse Turner was there, I'd stake my life on it."

Jack purses his lips. "The leader has to be a woman, otherwise Mister Turner would have used a Voice on her."

Will nods in agreement.

Jack nods to himself, and meets Will's eyes. "It's good to have you back, Will."

"I'm not back," Will snaps. "I'm just convenient. Don't make this into a habit."

Jack smiles. "Thank you for your time," he says, and turns to leave. Will chases him out.

"Have a good night, Jack," he replies, and closes and locks the door behind him. He runs his hands through his hair, but he is not shaking – not even a year ago, a scene like that would have struck him to his core, made him feel weak and helpless and useless, as he did when Abigail died.

Now, though.

Now he's not sure what he feels – his teeth itch, his throat is tense, wanting to snarl. He is feeling so many things at once; impotent outrage, that he could not have stopped this kill; guilt, because maybe if he was helping sooner, he could have; anger, that Mister Turner was such a weak Alpha that he could not protect his family.

Hunger, for the chase. He wants to find out who did it. Wants to paint the walls with their blood.

Pleasure, because he thinks Hannibal would feel the same, would guide Will's hands and purr for him when Will kissed him with blood in his teeth.

Will is an Alpha – not a slave to his instincts, but they are certainly there. And his instinct demands he hunt. If this woman and her children had threatened his own family, he would slaughter her and her kin without hesitation.

He doesn't tell Hannibal that Jack came by – Jack will likely inform him himself, and if not, Will can wait until Hannibal is home. He does not know what he will do, but whatever he decides upon, he wants Hannibal there to do it with him.

He prowls back to the study, sits and opens his book again, his mind aflame. He rubs over his gums, trying to soothe the ache in his teeth, and wonders how difficult it would be to track down a woman with three children in tow.

Hannibal would be good at that sort of thing. Will is sure he would help.

He smiles, and resumes reading, tuning out all else until he hears a key turn in the lock, and rises, ready to take his mate and call him to arms. They have no blood relation, but Hannibal was right – the pack Will chooses is the one he wants, the one he makes for himself, and if that is to include this notion of revenge, he will feed and nurture it, and watch it grow in his belly.

"Hello, my love," Hannibal greets with a soft purr, as Will approaches him, embraces him, and kisses him with teeth and fire.

Will smiles, wide. "Get your coat," he says, and Hannibal blinks at him, but obeys, shrugging it back on. The crime scene will be empty, he's sure, and unguarded. He takes Hannibal's hand, and pulls him to the door. "There's something I want to show you."

Hannibal makes a quiet, intrigued sound, his eyes bright with anticipation. "Then, by all means," he replies, and kisses Will's knuckles. Will thinks about them becoming red with blood and shivers, wanting Hannibal to lick them clean. "Lead on."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

sorry this chapter is so short!

The street is dark, the houses quiet by the time Will pulls up at the end of the street, below a busted lamp. He sees, a few houses down on the left, a noticeably empty driveway, and the bright yellow strip of police tape across the door. The crime scene may still be active, but Will knows how to navigate them without contaminating the scene, and he knows Hannibal is more than capable of moving through a sensitive place without leaving any trace of his passing. If he couldn't, he wouldn't be Shadow Man.

Beside him, Hannibal shifts in place, lets out a curious sound, and lifts his chin to scent the air. The street reeks of shock and sorrow, the kind where people rub their necks and say, 'I just can't imagine something happening like this' or 'Oh, those poor souls, at least they're with God now'.

Will kills the engine, and gets out of the car, and strides to the front of it. He leans against it, his eyes on the dark house. It is the only one without lights illuminating the windows, no porch lights, an overgrown lawn. Clearly Mister Price didn't get a chance to mow it last Sunday.

Hannibal joins him in silence, and Will's car gives a soft protesting groan as his weight settles against it, beside Will's. "What's here?" he asks.

Will presses his lips together, and traps his tongue between his teeth. The drive here had been short, since Hannibal and the Prices had shared the perimeter of neighborhoods. They're just within the territory where Suburbia really starts. He hadn't told Hannibal anything of why the sudden field trip, hadn't shared his thoughts – Hannibal knows better than to push for them before Will is ready, by now.

"Jack visited the house, while you were gone," he says. "After lunch."

He can feel Hannibal's eyes on the side of his face.

"I'm not angry you're helping him with cases," he adds, before Hannibal can offer either apologies or excuses. "Whatever keeps him off my ass, I don't care. But you weren't there, and I didn't want him bothering you at work, or risk you going with him instead of coming home to me."

He takes in a deep breath. "So I looked."

In his periphery, he sees Hannibal's head tilt. "What did you see?" he breathes. Will's lips twitch in a smile, amused by Hannibal's eagerness – but of course, Hannibal has only seen Will in action once. Even with their shared history, Hannibal only bore witness to the case involving Abigail Hobbs. To the girl on the stag's head that Will knows was placed there by Hannibal's hands.

Shadow Man was there, helping him as he always had, and had seen Will at work only once before the truth came to light. He tries to recall that, now, tries to remember the man, though he had been little more than a blip on the radar to Will at the time, another nameless suit that hovered at Jack's shoulder, wanting to see the weird little Alpha work his magic. Will wonders, if he had looked harder, if it would have been more obvious then.

He raises his chin and shrugs the thoughts away – they are old, and irrelevant now. "The Prices were all killed with gunshot wounds to the head. Point blank, in the back, except for the mother. She saw her killer before she died." His nostrils flare. "I think her son was the one to do it."

Unbidden, Hannibal breaks the silence with a soft snarl – it is an emotion Will feels in his own chest as well. Outrage, visceral and riotous, at the thought of a child killing their own mother. If Will was a father, regardless of the situation, he cannot say he would prioritize the life of his son over that of his mate.

That is, he would kill anyone who threatened Hannibal, blood or not.

He pushes himself from the car and strides towards the house, not looking back because he knows Hannibal will follow him. He walks up through the overgrown grass, the small pathway, sees a discarded Barbie doll sitting in the grass, an errant Frisbee. His brows rise, and he looks away again.

"The Prices had three children in total – two Alphas and a daughter. Their youngest, Dillon, was abducted a year ago," he tells Hannibal, reciting the notes from the case that feel embedded in his skull, sharpening his teeth and making his head feel warm.

He eyes the police tape, and sees that there is no seal on the door, since the crime scene has been examined and the bodies removed per protocol. He carefully peels off the end of the tape, letting it hang, and pulls his sleeve down so he doesn't get fingerprints on the handle, as he opens the front door and lets Hannibal inside. He closes the door behind them, and turns on the lights, wincing at the sudden brightness.

Hannibal purses his lips in thought, his eyes moving as Will's do, taking in the neat, if cluttered hallway, the bookshelf on the left with discarded shoes at the base, books and photos on the shelves, portraits on the walls. All so quaint, so *normal*. Will's upper lip twitches at the family photo displayed proudly above the living room fireplace. All present and accounted for – it must have been taken before Dillon's abduction.

"It would take quite a sizeable pack, to overcome and control so many," Hannibal notes.

Will nods. "At least four," he replies. "Female pack leader, so Mister Price couldn't use his Voice on her."

Hannibal nods as well, and looks to Will, then over his shoulder. He lifts his chin, and Will turns, seeing the edge of what he knows, recognizes from photos, is the dining room. He sucks in a breath, and leads the way inside, turning on the light. Everything has been cleaned, wiped down so that there is no evidence of the terrible tragedy that happened here. The air smells faintly of bleach.

"They were killed at family dinner," he says, and goes to the head of the table. His hands hover, but do not touch, along the back of the chair there. "Dillon sat here," he says, and looks to his right, where Missus Price died. Points, hand shaped like a gun, and shoots. "Looked her right in the eyes and shot her dead."

"The leader would have taken it upon herself to subdue Mister Price," Hannibal murmurs, taking his place on Will's left. His eyes move around the table. "Then two more, for the children."

"This was clean, and organized. She must have done this before, and if this is her M.O., there'll be a pattern," Will says. "Take a child, brainwash them, bring them home to kill their family." His eyes lift, and meet those of his mate's – he sees, within Hannibal's iris, something dark, considering. "Making a new one for herself."

Hannibal's eyes flash, and his lips thin out. He tilts his head. "You're angry," he notes.

Will's upper lip twitches, and he snarls down at the table. "Yes," he says. "I'm pissed."

"Why?"

"It's *weakness*," Will hisses, and lifts his eyes again. "What kind of Alpha would just sit there and let his family *die*? What kind of child kills his own mother – looks her right in the eyes and -."

He makes himself stop – he shouldn't blame Dillon. He of all people knows how susceptible the young mind is. His shoulders roll, spine quivering with outrage, and he curls his fingers into fists and forces them into the pockets of his coat.

Hannibal's lips twitch into a smile that is not quite pleased, but soft with understanding. "It could have been you," he says, driving right to the point as he does so well. Will winces, and sucks in a breath. "To think, you could have been in Dillon's place, if I was any less in love with you – it angers you deeply."

"Children are an open mold," Will whispers. He closes his eyes, lifts his head, breathes in deeply and smells only bleach – even Hannibal's scent doesn't reach him, despite how close he's standing. "Anyone that would pervert that innocence deserves to die. A thousand times."

Hannibal hums in agreement, and Will looks at him. Hannibal's smile is wider now, sharper at the corners. "Why did you bring me here, my daydreamer?"

"Help me find her," Will says. "Help me kill her."

Hannibal goes to him, and takes one of Will's tight fists in both hands. He raises Will's white knuckles to his lips, and Will finally lets himself relax, breathing out shakily as Hannibal kisses his fingers. "I swear," he vows, low and soft with promise.

Will smiles, and breathes out again, and tugs Hannibal to him, kissing him once, chastely. He guides Hannibal out of the house, turns off all the lights, and reattaches the tape, wiping his sleeve across where his fingers press.

They go back to his car, and climb inside, and Will starts the car again, and they drive away.

Once they are back in Hannibal's home, Will feels like he can breathe again, and he does, raggedly, sucking in a large breath through his open mouth as Hannibal closes and locks the door behind them. He is static, trembling in the hallway, and doesn't move as Hannibal's hands flatten over his shoulders, gently easing his coat off, and hangs it up.

Will turns his head, when Hannibal nuzzles his neck, a soft purr that is meant to soothe rumbling in his chest.

"I would have killed him," Will breathes; a soft confession to his mate's hair, as Hannibal removes his own coat, and only parts long enough to hang it as well. He returns to Will, kissing his exposed neck, making Will shiver. "My own son. I would have, the second I smelled something off." He shivers. "I feel evil even thinking that."

Hannibal sighs, and turns Will in place. He cups Will's face and rests their foreheads together. "Why?" he asks.

Will swallows. "I'd kill anything that threatened you," he replies.

Hannibal smiles. "It is a testament to your love for me, not a sign of your lack of love for offspring," he murmurs. "If Mister Price had fought, perhaps his mate and other children would have survived. We will never know, for certain."

Will swallows. "If your sister had come back, and tried to kill your family, who would you have attempted to save?"

Hannibal blinks, and pulls back. His hands don't retreat, only move to pet over Will's neck. "She was my priority," he says gently. "I loved her more than I have loved anyone in my life, until you became mine. Yet if she were to appear before us now, and tried to harm you, I wouldn't hesitate for a moment."

Will swallows again, his throat suddenly so tight.

"You are my future, Will," Hannibal finishes, heavy with conviction. "I would die to protect that future, whatever form it takes."

"Missus Price forgave Dillon," Will breathes. "I couldn't. I wouldn't."

"You don't have to," Hannibal replies. "We will find this woman and her pack. We will put an end to as many of them as we must." Will nods, closing his eyes when Hannibal lifts his chin, and kisses Will's forehead. He sighs. "I see this darkness like a cloud over your head, my love. I will never forgive Jack for forcing you back into thinking this way."

"Like I said – I wasn't going to let him take you away from me," Will replies. He pulls back, and tugs on Hannibal's hands, leading them to the study. They sit beside each other on the couch, and Will sees the book of all their letters. He smiles at it, but does not reach for it. "I'll admit, part of me liked it. I liked being that angry."

"Anger is an invigorating emotion," Hannibal says knowingly. "The satisfaction of seeking justice for an offense is what drove our species out of the mud, and what elevated men to the status of kings." Will licks his lips, sighing as Hannibal's hand flattens through his hair, petting it from his face, and dragging his nails down Will's neck. "It's okay to be angry, Will, as long as you do not let it consume you."

"I won't," Will promises. He looks to Hannibal. "We can't hunt this woman and visit my family at the same time. I will put it from my mind." Hannibal smiles at him, and Will leans in for a kiss, cupping his mate's face. "I didn't mean to throw you back into this world with me. I imagine you'd have been able to stay detached."

"Your attachment and your passion is what drew me to you, darling," Hannibal replies. "I admire it."

Will hums, lashes fluttering as Hannibal idly pets over his neck. A shiver runs through him, and he presses his lips together, lets his head fall to rest on Hannibal's shoulder as they settle on the couch. "A year is such a short amount of time," he murmurs. "And yet so long. So much can change and so much stays the same."

Hannibal nods, his cheek against Will's hair. He's purring, still seeking to soothe Will's lingering distress and irritation. Will flattens a hand over his chest, smiling at the subtle vibration within his lungs. He tilts his head, kisses chaste and light over Hannibal's neck, shivering when Hannibal's purr, for a moment, grows in pitch and volume.

Will shifts his weight, pushing himself upright, and climbs into Hannibal's lap. He cups Hannibal's face and kisses him, growling softly when both of Hannibal's hands flatten, wide and warm, along his spine. He grinds forward, seeking physical closeness with his mate – after the last few days, he thinks he'll go mad if Hannibal doesn't touch him. Will needs to gentle his teeth, to bask in the knowledge that his mate is safe and happy in his arms.

Hannibal smiles, his eyes dark and low-lidded as Will kisses him again, a purr in his own chest to match Hannibal's as they rock together. Hannibal's hands slide lower, cup Will's thighs, bringing him closer, and Will gasps, wraps his hands around Hannibal's nape and laces his fingers together, squeezing gently.

"I love you," he breathes, because it feels like he might die if he doesn't. Hannibal growls in answer, tilts his head to show his neck, letting Will mouth and lick over the marks he's placed there. He moans, heat spreading out in his head, down his spine, pooling in his belly as he feels Hannibal's pulse quicken beneath his tongue.

"And I love you, Will," Hannibal replies, just as quiet, breathless. Will closes his eyes and edges his teeth along the tendon in the side of Hannibal's neck, parts his jaws wide and bites down as Hannibal grinds up against him, seeking friction.

One of Hannibal's hands rises, fists in Will's hair, and pulls him back so their eyes can meet. "Thinking the way you do doesn't make you evil," he says. "You're a good man, Will – far better than I could ever hope to be." Will raises a brow, but decides not to argue. "Your unique way of looking at the world, by my influence or not, should be praised and admired, not hidden away. Not something to be ashamed of."

"Stop," Will says, and kisses him to encourage his silence. "Don't -. Just touch me."

Hannibal smiles, and pulls Will to him, before he rolls them, pressing Will down onto the couch. He kisses Will, deeply, again, until Will shivers and arches up, spreading his legs to let Hannibal fall and grind between them. The couch is not very deep, but it's wide enough, and Will clings to his mate, whining gently as Hannibal mouths at his neck and drops a hand, putting additional pressure on Will's trapped cock.

He digs his nails into Hannibal's shoulders, lets his mate bite him, and grind against him, and snarls softly when Hannibal works him to orgasm with nothing but his scent, his purr, the touch of his hand. He pulls Hannibal between his thighs and lets him rut against Will's body until he finishes as well, their mixed scents heavy in the air, driving away, finally, the scent of bleach and old blood.

Will kisses him, breathless, and closes his eyes. Hannibal wraps his arms around Will's shoulders, tucks his face to Hannibal's neck so he can block out the world, and they settle down to rest.

Will keeps his promise, and doesn't let thoughts of the Prices or the hunt trouble him. At least, he doesn't let himself think about it when Hannibal is around – if Hannibal knows he is still lingering on the subject, he doesn't give it voice, merely distracts Will with talks of philosophy, with music; with touches, to his neck, his back; with his kisses and his teeth and his knot whenever Will asks for it.

Then, it is Friday, and they're at the airport. Will texts Chris that they're boarding, and switches his phone to airplane mode, pocketing it as they settle in their seats – business class, and he's glad Hannibal didn't go all out and make it First. He sighs, rubbing both hands over his face, and rolls his head to one side to look at his mate.

Hannibal smiles at him, and squeezes Will's hand. "Remember, Will," he says, "your family loves you, and no matter what happens, I love you as well. However this weekend goes, it will not diminish or change how I feel about you."

Will rolls his eyes, blushing at the sentiment nonetheless. "Not like they can kick me out onto the streets," he says, the joke falling flat. He shouldn't joke about that. He clears his throat

and squeezes Hannibal's hand in answer. "I just…want them to like you. I know they'll like you. I just…*need* them to."

Hannibal's smile softens.

"I will be on my best behavior," he declares, and Will nods, blush deepening when Hannibal lifts his hand and kisses his knuckles. He can see, across the aisle, a woman shooting them a disapproving glare, and tenses inwardly – welcome to the South. He rolls his eyes at her, and settles back in his seat.

Hannibal leans in close to him, nuzzling his hair, and says; "Don't trouble yourself with the sheep, darling," he purrs, in a way that makes Will shiver, lashes going low.

But he grins, and entertains himself, briefly, with thoughts of hunting that woman, of watching her face twist in horror and fear when she realized they were going to devour her whole. He tilts his head, and kisses Hannibal chastely, squeezing his hand again.

The flight attendants do their normal checks, and the plane moves, rolling smoothly towards the runway. Will sits back, and closes his eyes, resting his temple against the window as the plane gathers speed, rumbles and rolls and heaves itself into the sky. Hannibal's touch gentles, but does not retreat, and Will manages to doze off before the captain even manages to turn off the 'Fasten Seatbelt' sign.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> so I realized like two weeks after updating that last chapter that the Turners were already dead because I had Will lecture on them in DDSM part one /facepalm. I went back and changed the names - it's actually significant and so don't be confused by the new names in this chapter xD
>
> sorry it took so long! I hope you guys like it <3

They land in Louisiana without trouble, and get off the plane, gathering their bags and heading to the arrivals' lounge. Will smells Chris before he sees Lisa, and smiles wide in recognition when she stands, waving her hand frantically to get his attention. He moves quickly through the little walkway and laughs when she flings herself into his arms, hugging him tightly. She stinks of her mate, and her children – a soft and sweet scent that touches her down to the bone. Will grips her tightly and buries his face in her neck, breathing in his cousin's scent, the scent of family, of bright joy.

"It's good to see you, Lisa," he says, for he hasn't seen her for so long, and it all comes sweeping back to him, the distance and time between their last reunion, which was when Chris got married, before they had children. She smiles at him, her blue eyes bright, her lips shining with a soft pink gloss, her hair long and blonde turning grey, drawn into a loose braid that sits over one shoulder. He steps back and gestures to Hannibal – as the known Alpha, it falls to him to make introductions, just as it would if Hannibal were the Omega between them. "Lisa, this is Hannibal, my mate. Hannibal, Lisa, Chris' wife."

"A pleasure," Hannibal purrs, and shakes her hand, lifting it so he can kiss her knuckles. He doesn't embrace her, as the scent of a foreign Alpha might not sit well with her husband.

She smiles, and lets out a happy laugh. "Oh, it's so nice to finally meet you, Hannibal!" she says brightly, her voice thick with the New Orleans drawl that Will trained himself out of when he moved to Virginia. "I must say, you're not at all how I pictured you!"

Will huffs, and rolls his eyes, hoisting his bag up higher on his shoulder.

"I'll tell Chris to bring the car around – he was able to get off work, so he could come get you guys with me. This way, this way," she says, and pulls out her phone, texting Chris as they follow her towards the pickup point outside of the airport. The scents of stale pastries and too-sweet coffee assault Will as they move through the airport, and then out into the blistering heat, humid and abrasive despite how late it is in the year. He grunts, and shrugs off his coat, folding it over the handle of his bag. "I trust the flight was good?"

"No complaints," Hannibal replies with a smile, every inch the same charming man he had been during the first social he accompanied Will to at the church in Harrogate. Will can tell Lisa is already absolutely besotted by him, and feels a flicker of pride, glad to see Hannibal being accepted so easily by his family. He knows Lisa has always been a sweet, lovely woman, but it settles something in him that still held teeth to see her being so welcoming.

A large, reddish-brown minivan streaked with mud pulls up in front of them, and the driver-side door opens while the engine is left running, revealing Chris. He looks exactly the same as Will remembers, though thicker in the shoulders and just starting to get a beer gut. He grins widely at Will, circles the front of the car, and lunges for him, embracing him in a hug so fierce Will almost loses his balance, and definitely loses his breath.

"Hey, shrimp!" Chris greets brightly, ruffling Will's hair in that way older siblings always say they're allowed to. Will huffs, batting him away, and Chris wraps an arm around Lisa's shoulders. "Hey, beautiful," he purrs, and kisses her warmly, before his eyes alight on Hannibal. "And you must be the mysterious Alpha who stole my cousin's heart!"

He's more correct than even he knows, and Will blushes as Hannibal mimics Chris' pose, though slightly more polite, and settles a hand at the small of Will's back. "It's wonderful to finally meet you, Chris," he says, and shakes the other Alpha's hand. "I've heard so much about you."

"All bad, I hope," Chris says with a wink, and then he parts from his wife with a sigh. "Alright, let's get the Hell outta here. Airport traffic makes me itch."

Will nods, and they load the bags in the trunk, as Lisa opens the sliding door and Will clambers inside, smiling when he sees evidence of small children – discarded snack pieces, coloring books, a G.I. Joe doll with one of the arms missing. He crosses the van and settles behind Chris, and Hannibal sits behind Lisa, fastening his seatbelt as she pulls the door closed and gets into the shotgun seat.

They are silent, for a moment, as Chris navigates the traffic and manages to pull away from the airport, merging onto the road that feeds out of it and onto a larger one. Chris moved to a farm after he started having children, and they live almost an hour and a half from the airport, so it'll be a long drive.

And, he thinks, bracing himself, one full of questions.

"So, you might have heard about us, but I didn't even know of your existence until a week ago," Chris declares, his eyes on the road but frequently darting up to the rearview mirror, so he can give Will a playfully chastising grin. "Tell us about yourself, Hannibal!"

Hannibal smiles, and reaches across the little space between their seats to take Will's hand. Will manages a tight smile, and gestures for him to talk his heart out.

"I am a former surgeon, and a psychiatrist in Baltimore," Hannibal says, his voice gentle over the rumble of the engine and the blasting air conditioning. "I was frequently used as a consultant for the FBI, which is how I met Will – we were both working on a case together."

"Oh, wow!" Lisa says, turning in her seat so she can look at them, her eyes wide. "That sounds so interesting." It would sound almost patronizing, but Will knows Lisa isn't like that. He squeezes Hannibal's hand. "So do you both work on cases together now?"

"Not in an official manner," Hannibal replies with a shake of his head. "Will gives lectures on past cases for the most part, and I'm only called on occasion to give a consultation." He leans forward and gives Lisa a conspiratorial smile. "I'm afraid I get far too distracted when watching Will work to be of any use."

She laughs, and Will's blush darkens, and he gives Hannibal an accusing look. Hannibal smiles back at him, and settles in his seat. "And you, Missus Graham?"

"Oh, well it's kind of a funny story," Lisa says, and settles a hand on Chris' thigh. "I met Chris when we were both in high school, I was out and some boys were trying to get a little too friendly, and he swooped in and defended my honor." Her voice softens, and Will smiles, because he knows this story, and remembers it fondly. Chris has always been that kind of Alpha. "But we didn't start dating until college, I fell in love on the first date, and the rest is history."

Chris smiles, his expression so tender and warm as he touches his wife's hand that Will feels a phantom ache, something dully throbbing and deeply sympathetic.

"I understand completely," Hannibal replies, and Will shivers, feeling his gaze on the side of his face. "The first time Will and I met, I wondered how I had gone all my life without him."

Lisa lets out a soft 'Aww' in answer, and Will wipes a hand over his mouth, rolling his eyes, though it's mostly just for the sake of it. He knows, of course, their love spanned far before they actually met in person, but they must pretend, for the sake of their story. He doubts Chris or his uncle David would react well to the whole truth. No one can know about Shadow Man, no matter how much Will wishes they could.

Chris clears his throat, as if sensing his thoughts. "Now, Will, I wanna warn ya – dad's being kind of…cagey about the whole thing. He's not been a real ass about it, but y'know how it is, people his age, growin' up in these parts."

"I'm prepared for that," Will replies quietly. "As long as he doesn't go out of his way to be a dick, he and I got no problem." He knows, after all, that David is a traditional kind of person, although he remembers Chris saying that Lisa's brother is gay, so it's not going to be the first time he ever encountered the idea.

Besides, a little passive aggressive homophobia would be better than him knowing about Shadow Man.

He sighs, and Hannibal's thumb brushes along his knuckles. He turns his head and smiles at Hannibal, the expression softening when Hannibal covers his hand with his other one and curls his fingers around Will's in a gentle grip.

Chris perks up, after a moment. "You guys hungry? There's a fantastic barbeque joint just up here if you're wantin' dinner."

Will winces internally, trying to reconcile the flavor and spice explosion that is Louisiana classic to Hannibal's upscale, five-course meals. Although, he supposes, if Shadow Man lived here for much of Will's youth, he must have had it before.

"That sounds wonderful," Hannibal says before he can answer. "I haven't had decent Creole cuisine in many years."

Chris huffs, and smiles. "You've been mated how long, and Will never made you his jambalaya?"

Will flushes, when Hannibal looks at him with a raised brow. "No, he hasn't," he replies with a smile.

"Hannibal normally cooks for us," Will says, somewhat defensively. He looks over, his flush darkening. "You never asked."

"Darling, I would happily eat anything you made for me," Hannibal says, and he sounds genuine. Of course, Will has cooked for him before, the one time before their hunt of each other. Will swallows, and tamps down the instinctive urge to argue that Hannibal's fancy food and refined palette would absolutely not be on par with Will's attempt at cooking his childhood meals. His father taught him how to make it when he was a kid, and he would for himself, on occasion, when he was feeling nostalgic.

Lisa turns around and smiles at them both. "We'll have to convince him to make some while you're here, then," she declares, with a meaningful look at Will. Will huffs, but rolls his eyes and gives her a nod. Chris merges into the slow lane, and then the turn-off, driving up the exit ramp and into a small cluster of shops and restaurants on the side of the road.

They eat, and Will admits he fucking missed good Louisiana barbeque. Not only that, but the sight of Hannibal with a paper napkin tucked beneath his chin, eagerly gorging himself on a surf-n-turf mix of ribs and crawfish covered in sauce and butter is one he'll remember for the rest of his life. He only regrets not getting any pictures, to send to Alana.

They wash up and continue driving, and just as the evening becomes nighttime, they pull onto a long driveway that leads to a large Southern-style plantation home, a big barn sitting behind it like a giant black beast, cast in shadow. There's a wraparound porch with a wooden rocking bench on it, and there are lights inside, making the whole place appear like a homely, welcoming beacon amongst the dark spread of fields.

They get out of the car, the air thick with the scent of grass, of slurry, echoing distantly with the bluster of cattle from within the barn. Hannibal tilts his head up, breathing in deeply, his eyes on the stars which seem to shine so much brighter when not polluted with Baltimore glow.

The night bugs whir to each other, and there are fireflies dancing around, as Chris and Lisa lead the way inside.

"The girls should be asleep," Chris tells them in a stage whisper, and they shed their shoes and he leads them through the front hallway, to a room that is tucked behind the staircase, and opens to reveal what looks like is usually a craft room, but has been cleared, and a wide cot placed within it that doesn't look as comfortable as Hannibal's bed, but supremely more welcoming than some of the things Will has had to sleep on.

They set their bags down and Chris smiles at them. "Bathroom's across the hall, and it has a shower if you need one. I apologize in advance if the girls or the cows wake you – neither of them shut up once dawn comes," he jokes, and Lisa rolls her eyes and swats him playfully on the chest. "We usually eat around eight in the morning, but if you guys need to sleep in, feel free. Dad said he'd be by around noon."

Will nods, and pulls Chris into another hug. He smells like woodsmoke, like hay, like fresh-mown grass, and Will didn't realize how much he missed him until he takes a deep breath in, and clings to him tightly.

"Thank you for this," he says, and Chris pats him on the back and pulls away with another smile.

"Any time, shrimp," he replies, and ruffles Will's hair once more. "Hannibal," he adds, and shakes his hand again. "Let us know if you need anything. Lisa and I tend not to sleep until the early hours, so we'll be up and about."

"Thank you," Hannibal says with a gracious nod. Chris and Lisa leave, shutting the door behind them, and Will sighs, plopping himself down on the cot. It's not a forgiving surface, but there are rolling mats and soft padding beneath the blankets that will hopefully soften the ache in his shoulder.

Hannibal smiles at him, and comes forward, cupping his face and kissing him chastely. "So far so good," he murmurs.

Will nods. "Yeah," he says, absently flattening the blankets out on either side of him. There are fleece ones, spread beneath an old, pink-red quilt that's fraying at the edges. Will smiles, and imagines Lisa making it when she was pregnant with her first daughter. He sighs. "Thanks for making me do this. I'm still not sure I won't have an anxiety attack when David shows up, but I'm still…glad we're here."

"As am I," Hannibal replies, and kneels down, flattening their suitcases and opening them, pulling out a pair of pajama pants for himself and Will, and one of their t-shirts each, as well as their toiletry bags. "Would you like the bathroom first?"

Will nods, and stands, gathering his clothes and bag from Hannibal. He pauses, and threads a hand around the back of Hannibal's neck, pulling him for a deep, long kiss. By the end of it, Hannibal is breathless, a soft growl stuck in his throat, his eyes flickering red.

Hannibal's fingers flex around his clothes, and he swallows harshly. "You are a terribly tempting thing," he purrs, and leans in for another kiss that Will eagerly grants him. He smiles into it, nips Hannibal's lower lip, and lets out a rumble of his own. He can taste the thick barbeque sauce clinging to Hannibal's tongue, aches for his sweet wine and his fine food – meat, he's found, tastes better when his mate is the one to provide it.

"Does it remind you of our past?" he whispers, nuzzling Hannibal's neck, over one of the bruises and marks of Will's teeth peeking out over the collar of his shirt. "The scents, the food, knowing you cannot have me no matter how much we both want it?"

"I am settled, knowing that you are mine," Hannibal replies, "but yes. You cause a terrible ache in me, darling; I am tempted to take you anyway, to cover your mouth so no one can hear you no matter how loud you try to be."

Will shivers, swallowing harshly, his head warm and his chest growing tense and tight. "Who says I'd let you?" he teases.

Hannibal merely laughs, and kisses his red cheek. "If you want me, Will, simply say so."

Will smiles, and parts from him with one more kiss. "We can control ourselves for a few days," he says, and Hannibal breathes in, nose to Will's hair, takes one last deep, greedy inhale before he must release Will and resign himself to letting Will come back, too-clean and covered in foreign shampoo. Will smiles, and gives him one last kiss, before he leaves the room and crosses the hallway to the bathroom on the other side.

Will surges upright with a gasp, pawing at his forehead. He can still feel the cold muzzle of the gun pressed to his skin, it burns him like ice, he can feel the blistering heat, hear the sound of the trigger *click*ing and the explosion of the bullet entering his skull. He whines loudly, and Hannibal is awake immediately, if he wasn't already woken by Will's sudden movement.

Will claws at his hair, his skull, shuddering as Hannibal wraps an arm around his shoulders and kisses his ear. "You're alright," he breathes. Will's stomach recoils with revulsion – he hasn't had a nightmare since Shadow Man warmed his bed for the first time, and he hates Hannibal seeing him so weak, so affected. He's covered in sweat and trembling, soaking the blankets and the padding on the cot. His shoulder aches sharply, his throat feels raw like he'd been screaming in his sleep.

He had seen it so clearly, a boy who looked equally like him and Hannibal, sitting at the head of the table with a gun pointed at Will. Behind him, a presence with no face, no shape to denote gender or sex, merely a black void of malice. Across from Will, Hannibal, with a child who looked a lot like John holding a gun to his head. Behind another child who looked like Alice, Abigail stood. Behind a boy who looked like Wally, a man who looked a lot like Elijah held a gun to his hair.

He rips the covers off him, panting harshly. He's closest to the wall, so he cannot escape the cot unless he wants to climb over Hannibal, and he's suddenly so weak, his heart ricocheting like a bullet in his chest, his breath coming so sharp and stuttering he feels like there are holes in his lungs.

There had been another person at the table, a boy, all grown up now, who looked like Jesse Turner.

"It's happened before," he rasps, and Hannibal lets out another quiet, worried sound, his fingers pressing to Will's pulse and his other hand petting through his hair. "The Prices. That – that happened before. The Turner case, I lectured on it the weekend I had dinner with you."

Hannibal doesn't make a sound, but nuzzles Will's shoulder, still petting him and trying to soothe him down from his nightmare. His hand moves from Will's pulse and settles over his chest, and Will's heart finally begins to calm, knowing the scent and touch of his mate, knowing that Hannibal means strength and safety. Shadow Man would never let anything happen to him.

"Which family did you dream of?" he whispers after a moment.

Will swallows, wincing. "It was a mix," he says. "I was the mother. You were the father. The boy who shot me looked like us." He doesn't mention Wally or Alice, Abigail or John or Elijah, choosing to believe that his brain simply gave him the faces of children he knows rather than any significance of his found family. "There was someone standing behind him."

"A woman?" Hannibal asks, for he knows the case as well as Will does. "Eva Kingsley was the leader of the pack that massacred the Turners. Was she there?"

Will shakes his head, bringing his knees to his chest and resting his forehead on them. Hannibal's hand moves from his heart, and from his hair, stroking up and down his back instead. "It was different, but it was the same," he says quietly. "The -."

He stops, frowning.

"Dillon Price is an Alpha," he says.

Hannibal pulls back, so Will can see his face in the muted darkness, only the light from the moon in the back window beside their bed lighting up his features. It makes him appear skeletal, but when Will shivers, it is not out of fear. "He is," Hannibal replies, coaxing, soft, drawing the answers from Will as they take shape and snarl in his head.

"Eva took Omegas," Will adds, and looks away again as Hannibal gently pets down his back. "She took Omegas because that's who she wanted, but this family – the Prices didn't have any Omegas. So they took an Alpha. Who would…?" He frowns, he feels like he's just on the verge of something. Something sits, in the back of his skull where Shadow Man lingers. "Who would try and take Alpha children?"

"Perhaps the gender did not matter, so much as the act itself," Hannibal supplies. Of course Shadow Man would think like that – he would not have cared if Will was Alpha, Omega,

both, neither. Would not have cared if he was female or male or something between the two. It is about the mind, for him, not the conquest.

"Alphas are prideful," he whispers, for that much is true. The feeling, the truth, stirs in him. He doesn't want to look, please *God*, he doesn't want to look.

But he has to look. He has to see.

Hannibal hums in agreement, and kisses his shoulder again. "An Alpha would have succumbed to Mister Price's Voice," he says – not denying Will's half-formed theory, but drawing it out further, like leeching poison from a wound.

Will swallows. He knows this, he said it himself. "Unless he was mated," he replies, and turns his head to look at Hannibal again. Even as he says it, he knows it's true. "Unless he found someone to help him. If he couldn't have children, and tried to make his own family, like Eva did, like – like we've talked about."

"Found family can be more powerful than that related by blood," Hannibal says with a small nod. "But if that theory tracks, darling, perhaps it would be worth considering that this new pack leader is not an Alpha." Will frowns. "Eva killed three families before she was caught. She had three children."

Yes, she did – all Omegas. Will's frown deepens. "What happened to those kids?" he asks. "I never looked into it."

"Neither did I," Hannibal replies. "But if memory serves, the oldest was just on the verge of maturity when the Turner murder happened. He may have grown into his own as their pack leader, with his new brothers, and wished to continue their mother's work."

Will nods, biting his lower lip. Without an Alpha in the pack, a group of Omegas would be vulnerable. It would make sense for them to target young Alphas, that they could groom and bond with. Omegas are masters of social manipulation; they must be to survive in this world.

"I need to call Jack," he whispers. "We need to tell him to look into what happened to those other kids, to see if we can track them down."

Hannibal nods, and lets out a soothing rumble. "It's still early, darling," he coaxes, and cups Will's chin, turning him so he can rest their foreheads together. "It can wait. You should get some more rest."

"I don't want to rest," Will argues, but allows Hannibal to lay him back down. Hannibal rolls him to his stomach and presses close to his back, his head on Will's bad shoulder, one leg draped heavy and warm across his thighs. Hannibal pulls one of the sheets back over them, for Will is far too warm to endure both Hannibal's heat and more blankets.

Still, he shivers, as Hannibal places a warm, wide kiss to the sweaty nape of his neck, pushes his hair out of the way and rests his teeth over the sensitive place that, if Will were an Omega, would melt him to the bed. He sighs, forces himself to close his eyes, and aches deeply when Hannibal purrs, still seeking to soothe him. He must be tired, for Will has run

him ragged the last few weeks, and Will feels another harsh knot of guilt coil in his stomach for bringing the case to their bed when he promised he wouldn't.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, and whines softly when Hannibal's fingers lace with his.

"Do not apologize, my love," he replies, and kisses Will's neck again. "When you were young, you told me of your nightmares, and you asked me what you should do to protect the ones you love, do you remember?" Will nods. "And I said you must make yourself bigger, and stronger, so that no harm comes to your family. You have done that, my daydreamer, and every time I see that instinct in you, I am in awe."

Will huffs, though he is warmed by the words. He turns his head into the pillow, then to the other side, nudging Hannibal off him so he can cup his face and kiss him chastely. Hannibal's purr is loud, soothing, his scent calm and sweet from the borrowed body wash – not quite his own, but still pleasant, like butterscotch instead of caramel. He tucks his nose to Hannibal's neck, wraps an arm around him, and tries to will himself back to sleep.

He manages, but his dreams are still plagued by that nameless, formless, faceless shadow, and his sleep is fitful, and too-easily interrupted by the introduction of birdsong, the bellow of cattle, and the high-pitched shrieks and heavy thumps of young children rising from their beds.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> David is a little more of an asshole than originally intended, so warnings for homophobic and derogatory language/attitudes.

Chris and Lisa have three daughters – Ellen, Joanna, and Mirabelle, in order. Ellen is thirteen, and is the spitting image of Lisa, with her glossy blonde hair and wide, kind blue eyes. Joanna looks a lot more like Chris; she has his jaw, his nose, his darker eyes, and is nine. Mirabelle is four years old, and seems to take after her father more too – she shares Chris' thousand-watt smile and the shape of his face. They are all absolutely charming young girls, and though Will has never met any of them, they greet Will and Hannibal as they emerge from the craft room with high-pitched, gleeful calls of their names, and Will huffs when Mirabelle instantly throws herself around his legs, hugging him tightly.

"Hey, shrimp," Chris calls when he notices them, and waves Will over, offering him a mug of coffee that Will eagerly takes. He's glad that the household is made up almost entirely of women, for they won't be able to smell the lingering scents of distress that cling to Will like old sweat. It's almost eight in the morning, when Chris said they typically eat, and the two older girls are with their mother in the kitchen, stirring pancake batter and cooking bacon on the stove. He breathes in appreciatively, eyeing the giant bowl of grits next to the bacon, his stomach rumbling. "Mornin', Hannibal! Coffee?"

"Please," Hannibal replies, as polite and genteel as he always is. Mirabelle has let Will go, and stands between him and her father, her big brown eyes gazing up at Hannibal as if he's a new animal she's never seen before. Will settles against the counter, out of the way, taking in the kitchen as he watches the women cook. The top shelves of the cabinets are lined with trinkets, little porcelain statues – the kind that become inherited more than purchased, as well as a collection of empty beer bottles and strange-looking whiskey Chris must have gathered during his years. The room is flooded with sunlight, coating the air pleasantly yellow, the walls packed with family portraits containing different combinations of Chris, Lisa, and their children. Despite the noise, and the cacophony of smells, Will likes it – it's clear that Chris' family is one built on love and adoration, joy coating the walls like paint, soaked into the air. It's tough to imagine Chris ever behaving like one of those grumpy old men that Will's father or David became, and Will is glad to see his cousin so happy.

"Hey, you okay?" Chris asks after a moment, having given Hannibal his own mug of coffee and showing him where the sugar and milk is, should he want it.

Will blinks, and presses his lips together. "Fine," he replies, and takes another sip. He will just drink it black, unwilling to navigate the chaotic precision of Lisa and her daughters as they go about preparing breakfast. "Just tired."

Chris eyes him in silence, and then he lets out a soft, accepting huff. He looks over his shoulder to his family, and then takes Will by the elbow, leading him through the back door and out onto the porch. They've let the cows out to graze, the scent of slurry and the particular dustiness of the animals settled in the air. They are all big brown beasts, grazing contentedly on the long grass that stretches between the house and the barn.

There are two rocking chairs on the back porch, and Chris goes to one of them, settling with a sigh. Will takes the other, and wonders, if he had never met Hannibal, if this would have been his fate – albeit with far less for company. He might have become one of those old Alphas who never mated, kept his dogs and bought some land and resigned himself to solitude and quiet. The thought isn't as comforting as he used to find it in his childhood.

Chris sips at his coffee, and then lets out a soft hum. "You still have nightmares," he says. He doesn't make it sound like a question.

Will winces, setting his drink down by his foot, and resists the urge to look back through the window to see if he can spy Hannibal. No doubt Hannibal will have offered to help Lisa with breakfast, seamlessly ingratiating himself to her and her daughters and making himself at home. He's always so poised, and so gracious, even when not playing the host. Will, in comparison, interrupts the flow like a stick in the mud. He presses his lips together.

"Sometimes," he admits. After all, he can't hide that from Chris. Though the time Will actually shared a room with him was comparatively short before Chris went to college, he was there long enough to know Will had bad dreams as a child.

Chris nods almost absently, as if Will were talking to him about the weather and not his nightmares. "You wanna talk about them?" he asks.

No, Will really doesn't. But he doesn't shake his head.

"It's just about this case I was working before we came down here," he replies. "Well, technically Hannibal was working on it, but I've lectured on a past one where the execution was similar. I guess it followed me out here."

Chris absorbs this, his expression uncharacteristically somber. "I'm sorry," he offers. "That sucks."

Will lifts his shoulder in a shrug.

"Sometimes Lisa and I will read about something, hear it on the news, or word of mouth, you know how it is." Will nods. Despite people growing farther apart in terms of the classic community from his youth, Chris still lives in the kind of place where word spreads. "Fucks with me somethin' awful, the kind of things people can do. Couldn't imagine looking at it, talking about it, every day." He shudders, and then looks at Will, and forces a too-light laugh. "But I guess that's a perk of having a psychiatrist as a mate, yeah? You can talk about shit like that with him."

Will winces internally. "I try not to," he replies softly, his fingers flexing. "I've never been particularly comfortable with the idea of therapy. And sometimes thoughts should just remain

where they are."

Chris is silent for another moment, and when Will looks at him, he finds his head tilted, a curious look on his face, something hesitant making his eyes shine darkly. "What?" Will demands, shifting his weight.

"Oh? Nothing," Chris says, in that way people do when they definitely mean *something.* He looks away, pressing his lips together. "I guess that makes sense. You always did kind of keep to yourself. Hell, didn't even know you were getting married until last week, so."

Will sighs, another flicker of guilt rising up in him. "I am sorry about that," he says. "Honestly it just…didn't occur to me, really. And then there's the whole…" He lifts a hand, gesturing vaguely towards the house. "Gay thing."

Chris nods, accepting that. He clears his throat and takes another drink of his coffee, clears his throat again. He's clearly gearing up for something, and Will manages a tight smile, and says; "Come on, man, out with it. I'm a big boy."

Chris huffs, rolling his eyes. "Still a shrimp, shrimp," he replies playfully, and Will grins at him. "I ah…. Well, I kind of wanted to ask if you still…talk to that friend of yours. The one that would write to you as a kid."

Will freezes, his heart stilling in his chest. He genuinely didn't think Chris would have remembered his letters from when he was a child, wouldn't know about Shadow Man. Maybe David told him. Maybe he is just asking – but Will trained himself to recognize patterns, he had to for his way of looking at the world, and the coincidence is far too clear for him to act without caution.

He swallows, and says; "Did David tell you about him?"

Chris turns his head, meets his eyes. "Yeah," he replies. "We'd talk every week, he would keep me up to speed. Told me about the letters he found when you were in school." Will nods to himself, closing his eyes, and looks away. "I'm not sayin' anythin' about it, one way or the other – I have no idea what it's like to lose my dad, and that young, I'm not gonna fault you for making a friend. I was just curious."

Just curious. What do they say about curiosity and cats?

Will swallows. "If I told you I still talk to him, what would you say?"

"Well…" Chris trails off, lets out a small, strained laugh. "I guess my next question is what he thinks about you having a mate." Will blinks at him, frowning. "I don't know man – kinda guy who leaves letters for kids and plays games with them, all those years…. Seems like the kinda guy who would grow attached."

And he's not wrong. He has no idea how right he is.

Will doesn't know what to say, except the only thing he can; "He just wants me to be happy." Chris looks at him again. "He knows about Hannibal. He's okay with it."

Chris is silent for a moment, and then he nods. "Well, that's good," he says with another loud clearing of his throat. He finishes his cup of coffee and wipes his hand over his mouth. "I'm glad you have friends, Will."

"Don't tell David," Will says, leaning forward so that Chris meets his eyes again. "Please? He lost his shit when he found out – if he knew I was still talking to him…"

"Hey, no, I get it," Chris says, holding up a hand. He shakes his head. "It's your business, and as long as you're being safe, and you're happy, then I got nothin' to say to that." He hesitates, and tilts his head. "Does *Hannibal* know about your friend?"

Will huffs, and rolls his eyes. "You think I can keep a secret worth a damn from him? He's a *psychiatrist*."

"Hey, man, like I said before, people can do some crazy shit you wouldn't believe. You know that." Will sighs, and nods, bending down to pick up his coffee cup and taking a sip of the bitter drink. Their attention is drawn by the back door opening, and Hannibal emerges, Mirabelle in tow. He gives Will a warm smile.

"Breakfast is served," he says, and Will smiles, standing and following him back in, Chris coming in behind. They go to the dining room, which is much smaller than Hannibal's, the table large and leaving only about two feet of space between it and the walls and dining cabinets. Every place has been set, with Chris at one head of the table, Hannibal at the other, Lisa on Chris' right and Will on Hannibal's left, the three girls stationed on the other side. The bowl of grits is the centerpiece, on one side of it a light blue serving platter piled high with fluffy pancakes, the other a plate with bacon and sausage links – the thin, greasy kind featured often in hotel breakfast buffets.

It all smells fantastic, and Will takes his place with a happy sigh, catching Hannibal's smile and brushing their knees together beneath the table. Lisa clears her throat, and she, Chris, and the girls join hands and bow their heads.

Will presses his lips together, but when Hannibal takes Ellen's hand, and Will's, Will huffs and takes Lisa's other hand.

"God, thank you for bringing Hannibal and Will to us safely," Chris says. "Watch over our family, and those who cannot be with their families today. We ask you to bless this food you have given us, and all the gifts we've received from your loving hand. In Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," the girls chorus, and let go of each other. Ellen stands and starts taking plates, Lisa on the other side, dishing out hearty portions of the meat, pancakes, and grits, until every plate is full. Alphas traditionally eat first, and Will and Hannibal wait until Chris takes his first bite, before everyone else joins in.

"After this, you and I are going grocery shopping, Will," Lisa declares with a conspiratorial smile. "I want your jambalaya for dinner."

"Yes ma'am," Will replies, for he could no more deny her a wish than he could Alana, or Diane, or Deborah. Perhaps Hannibal was right, and he has a habit of drawing the kind of

women to him who don't take 'No' for an answer. She grins at him and nudges his shoulder playfully, before turning her attention back to her meal.

Will pauses, as he hears his phone ringing from the craft room where they slept. He gives Lisa an apologetic smile, and stands, leaving the table and going to the other room, finding his phone still plugged in and charging below the bed. He bends down and unplugs it, frowning at the number he doesn't recognize.

"Will Graham," he answers.

"Will." It's Jack. Will sighs, and rubs a hand over his mouth, settling on the cot. "There's been another one."

Will freezes, his eyes wide. "Another one?" he repeats.

"Another family annihilation, just like the Prices." Jack's voice is low, black with anger – the kind Alphas get when someone threatens their own family. Will shivers at the sound of it, and leans forward, his elbows on his knees.

"Shit," he breathes, and runs a hand through his hair. "I was going to call you about that anyway – this has happened before. With the Turners, you remember them?"

Jack is quiet for a moment, and then he says, "Yes." Then, "Can you come in to read it?"

"No," Will replies, and smiles when Jack growls at him. "I mean I really can't. Hannibal can't, either. We're both in Louisiana right now."

"Why?" Jack demands, after a small pause.

"Because you're not my boss anymore, and you were never his, and we can do whatever we want. And before you say anything, no, I'm not going to let you fax it in, I'm not going to look at any email you send me."

"People are dying, Will," Jack says darkly. "And it sounds like whoever's doing it this time around is already in your head."

He's right, and Will hates that he's right. He bares his teeth and contemplates just ending the call right there. He doesn't, but it's a close thing. "Have you spoken with Eva Kingsley, yet?"

"No."

"Well, you should. She led the last 'family' that did this. Do you know what happened to the kids she took?"

"They all went into the system, far as I know," Jack replies. "I have people looking into it already. And keeping an eye out for Dillon Price."

Will nods to himself, closing his eyes. How is it that he's always, *always*, so easily sucked in? He hates that about himself – hates his curiosity, hates his unquenchable thirst for knowledge

and answers. Hates, even, for a single second, Shadow Man, for planting and tending to it for so long.

"Eva took Omegas," Will tells Jack. "Dillon's not an Omega, he's an Alpha. If it was one of Eva's kids carrying on where his mother left off, he'd be compelled to find an Alpha that could protect them, and give them Voices and all that, if they needed it. We need to find out what happened to Eva's kids."

"Oh, so it's 'we' now, is it?" Jack says, smug and amused. Will growls, lowly, and before he can answer, Jack continues; "How long are you gone for?"

"We're flying back Monday."

"I'll have the case file ready for you," Jack says, and Will closes his eyes again, runs his hand through his hair, and again curses his own weakness, his own dogged determination to see something through to the end. For if one of Eva's kids is doing her work in her absence, it's not the end, and it won't be until all of those children are caught. "I'll see you Monday."

He hangs up, and Will snarls more loudly, throwing his phone into his suitcase. The soft thud is not nearly as satisfying as he hoped it would be. He flops back onto the cot, and turns, burying his face in Hannibal's pillow and taking a deep breath of his scent. He doesn't need this shit – Chris asking questions and then *David*, God knows how David is going to behave, and then on top of that, Hannibal is going to know something's up with him, and ask questions of his own. Will can probably buy himself some time there, tell him that yes, they will talk, when Will is ready. Yes, he will give answers when he is able to give them. If nothing else, Hannibal is patient, but his patience means Will can't just bury his head in the sand and shut his eyes to the world.

He must have been thinking about Hannibal too loud, because he hears the door swing open, and he looks up to see Hannibal there. His expression is open, head slightly tilted, and when he sees Will his eyes darken, and he steps in, closing the door behind him. He doesn't come any closer.

"Would you like to be alone?" he asks.

Will shakes his head, and Hannibal approaches, then, and Will pushes back so he has room to lie down on the cot as well. Will refuses to give up the pillow, so Hannibal takes Will's from him, folding it and putting it beneath his cheek as he settles with a sigh.

Will reaches, gently flattening his hand on Hannibal's warm cheek, breathing in his scent. He smells more like himself – hints of maple, of meat, but still that paper and salted caramel scent beneath. He licks his lower lip, brushes his thumb below Hannibal's, until it rests below the center of his mouth, and sighs.

"Jack called," he says, and Hannibal's eyes sharpen, his lips purse very subtly in aggravation. "There's been another family slaughter."

Hannibal sighs through his nose, takes Will's hand and kisses his knuckles, before letting Will put his touch back on his cheek. "Did he order you to come home?"

"He tried. I told him 'No', but I'm seeing him Monday," Will replies. When Hannibal doesn't answer, Will adds; "I have to. I just…have to."

"I understand," Hannibal says, so softly it's barely audible. Will nods, sucks in a shaky breath, lifts his eyes as he rolls onto his back. He takes in the shelves of sewing materials, the swaths and swatches of fabric, the little doodles and paintings blue-tac'd to the walls from the girls throughout the years. Eyes the gleam of the sewing machine on the table above their heads, the in-progress hemming being done to a dress folded neatly in the chair beneath the desk. It's so reassuringly, disgustingly quaint. *Homely*. Straight out of a TV show where the biggest drama is what to wear for the school dance.

"Blood is so weak, isn't it?" Will murmurs, still looking up – to the ceiling, now, watching the silhouettes of bees and flies dance around outside. "It's so easily shed, the ties that bind so quick to break. Taken as a given and so depended upon."

Hannibal says nothing, merely reaches out and rests his hand over Will's chest.

"I never knew my mother," Will says. "And my father – well, he loved me, I know he did, but he got sick soon after and then he died. And then my uncle, yeah, he loved me too, the kind of love you have for strays, I guess. And I know Chris loves me – but whenever I would think about them, it was always so…." He sighs. "Distant? I don't feel at home, here. I appreciate their family like I would a movie – something to see, a nice distraction and entertainment, but not something I need. Or want. I feel like I'm eating grass, out here."

Hannibal hums, drumming his fingertips lightly in time with Will's heartbeat, before his hand presses flat. "If these people you are chasing are the same Eva gathered to herself, it's likely they felt the same way," he replies. "If those too young became wards of the state, no matter how loving the family that took them in must be, it is not their family – not the one they chose."

Will hums. "A distraction."

"Exactly," Hannibal murmurs, and Will turns his head to find him watching Will. His face betrays no emotion, save for a slight crease in his brow that always forms when Will is upset. His eyes, though…. Well, Hannibal could express odes and epics with his eyes.

He rolls onto his side with a sigh, tucking his arm beneath the pillow, and breathes in.

"Every family loves differently," Hannibal tells him. "Every family is unique. These boys have found theirs. It will be difficult to convince them there is an acceptable alternative."

"It is wrong that I can kind of see where they're coming from?"

Hannibal's eyes flash, and his head tilts. Another verse to the poem being written in his head. "What did you and Chris speak about, if you don't mind me asking?"

Will smiles. "He asked me if I still wrote to my 'friend', the one who left me letters as a kid." Hannibal smiles. "I told him he did. He asked if he knew about you. I said he did. He asked if *you* knew about *him*. And I said you did." Hannibal's smile widens, and softens, and he

cradles his fingers through Will's and holds them between their chests, on the bed. "I guess he was worried because the kind of guy who writes to a kid might get attached, you know?"

"He wasn't wrong," Hannibal replies. "I became very attached to you. And, I suppose, though my feelings towards blood-related family and the strength of chosen bonds might differ slightly from yours, there is one thing we can agree on – you're family, Will. And any alternative to you would not nourish me in the slightest."

Will swallows harshly, his throat too tight with emotion to answer. He squeezes Hannibal's hand and pushes himself across the bed, so he can cup Hannibal's face and kiss him – it's deep, and he can taste bacon on his tongue, the sweetness of the pancakes and syrup and the full, starchy aftertaste of the grits. Hannibal ate well, it seems, and though Will barely ate at all, he's not hungry for food. He finds Hannibal's kiss, his touch, far more nourishing than food could ever be.

Hannibal's free hand slides down his flank, holding him tightly as Will kisses him, and Will is about a breath away from asking if Hannibal would be opposed to them sneaking away and fucking in the barn, before there's a knock on the door, and he hears Chris clearing his throat.

He huffs, and rolls his eyes, and Hannibal smiles, sitting up. He goes to the door and opens it. If Chris has anything to say about the thick scent of both of them, warmed and ready in the room, he doesn't voice it. "Uh, David's here," he announces, looking guilty. "Came early, I guess. So, brace yourselves."

Will winces, running a hand through his hair. "Sure," he says, forcibly light. "Might as well get it over with, I guess." He stands, and Hannibal takes his hand in a reassuring grip, offering a small smile. Chris nods and leads the way to the living room.

Will doesn't know what he expected his uncle to look like. Twenty-eight years is a long time, and Will remembers him as being so big, so absolute and unshakable. The one time he'd seen him really lose his temper and freak out had been the time he'd found Shadow Man's letters.

It's almost impossible to recognize him as he is now. He's no longer larger than life, no longer towering and imposing and strong – he is almost half the size Will reasonably expected him to be, so thin he's skeletal, only a few wisps of greying hair stuck to the top of his head. For a hysterical moment, he wants to ask Chris if he brought the right father.

Then David's head turns, and Will meets his eyes. Oh. There he is – sharp brown eyes, thickly ringed with red, meet and lock with Will's. There is an animal intelligence there, the same Will remembers in his youth, the same that knew *exactly* what kind of trouble his son was getting up to, who congratulated Chris when he won fistfights and nursed himself into a stupor every night. The kind of Alpha that could make raging bulls stop in their tracks.

The girls and Lisa are not in the room, and Will is too aware that right now the ratio of Alphas to everyone else is far too high. He doesn't think David is in much of a state to turn things physical, and Hannibal is of course far too controlled to let himself slip, but the room reeks of Alpha and stings his nose, makes his heart speed up inside his chest.

He blinks at Will, as if surprised to see him all grown up, and then his eyes slide to Hannibal. Will can feel a subtle tension in the room, two rival tigers catching sight of each other; a pride leader noticing a juvenile sniffing too close at his females. David's thin lips press together, and he wets them. "This him?" he asks.

Will swallows, and squeezes Hannibal's hand. "David, this is Hannibal Lecter," he rasps. "My mate. Hannibal," he nods to the other Alpha. "My uncle, David Graham."

Hannibal gives David a slight bow of his head in deference, but unlike Chris, he does not offer to shake his hand. "A pleasure to finally meet you, Mister Graham," he says.

"Mm," David replies, his eyes narrowing. "What's that accent?"

"Eastern Europe," Hannibal says coolly. "Lithuania, to be precise."

"Never heard of it."

"Most people haven't."

David hums again, and his eyes slide to Will. It's strange – Will is a grown man now, he's killed people for God's sake, and yet when his uncle looks at him Will feels like he's eight years old and shivering like a soaked puppy. "You know if you wanted yourself a pretty foreign bitch you could have just gone South," he says.

Will tenses, and Chris lets out a growl of warning. "Dad," he hisses, glaring at David.

"What? It's true," David replies with a lift of his chin. "You think your daddy wanted you to spend your life on your knees? Can't even give him grandbabies to look down on from the clouds. Such a waste."

Will snarls, snapping his teeth together. In truth, he didn't expect anything better, but preparing for something and then having it actually happen are two very different things, on the tail of his conversation with Jack, his nightmare, and the stress in general, he's in no mood to just stand here and take it.

Hannibal, though, is smiling, and huffs a soft laugh, surprising Will enough that it quiets his angry snarl. He looks at his mate, and Hannibal has that same placid smile on his face he wears for particularly irritating people, indulging them because he finds it amusing.

"I'm sorry to hear you think your nephew is a waste, Mister Graham," he says calmly, but with an undeniable coldness. "Personally, I think he's the singularly most incredible man I've ever met. Perhaps one day you'll be convinced to think the same." He turns away from David as if he were no more interesting than a shiny bauble, and touches Will's arm. "Now, I believe we were meant to join Lisa in preparing for tonight's dinner. Shall we?"

Will clears his throat, and swallows. "After you," he says, and lets Hannibal lead him out of the room. He hears Chris mutter something to his father, but doesn't pay attention to what it is. He holds his breath until they are outside.

Chris follows, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry," he says, genuinely apologetic. "I swear, he wasn't this much of an asshole with Lisa's brother. I really thought he'd at least pretend to be cool."

"It's quite alright," Hannibal says, much more warmly this time. "We cannot help how people are trained to think, unfortunately. All we can do is not let it trouble us." The last part, Will knows is said for his sake. He takes in a deep breath, rolls his shoulders, tries to shake it off.

"Right," he grits out. "Old bastard probably wouldn't approve of anyone I mated with anyway."

Hannibal smiles at him. "It's good then, that I won your favor without any outside influence," he teases, and Will rolls his eyes, but can feel his dark mood dissipating in the wake of Hannibal's smile. He can tell his mate is angry, for Hannibal detests rudeness, especially the kind born from prejudice – the purposeful kind. He's sure if David was worth eating, he'd already be planning recipes.

Chris nods, looking relieved. "I'll go get Lisa and tell her you're ready to go, and then rip my dad a new one. You okay, shrimp?" he asks, nodding to Will.

"I'm fine," Will replies. And, truthfully, now that the man isn't immediately in his sights, he is. Yes, his uncle is the reason Will had a roof over his head and food in his belly, he kept Will warm and dry and helped him with school and anything he needed, but in the parameters of Will's new life, he is of no more consequence than a passing thunderstorm. Will doesn't owe him any guilt, or any shame.

Chris nods, and squeezes his shoulder, before he disappears inside to summon his wife. Will breathes out again, rolls his shoulders, wincing when his bad one protests the night of sleep on the cot, combined with his tension and nightmare.

He looks to Hannibal. "Are you okay?"

"Unfortunately, it's about what I expected," Hannibal replies with a small nod. "I did, after all, become quite acquainted with your family while you were still very young – I watched, and learned about them." He smiles. "Your uncle is much the man he was when he was raising you."

Will huffs. "I remember him being so much…more," he says.

"As children often do around authority figures," Hannibal replies easily, squeezing his hand. "I imagine had you met me when you were still that young, I would have seemed quite different."

"Mm. Big and scary," Will teases, grinning.

"Scary? Never. I never wanted you to be afraid of me."

"I never was," Will murmurs, and turns to him, leaning in so he can nuzzle Hannibal's neck. He notices that Hannibal is wearing one of his looser shirts, that fall open around his throat,

baring more skin – and, of course, the marks Will left on him. He huffs, and smiles, knowing Hannibal likely did it so that David could see.

Hannibal lets out a soft purr, wrapping an arm around Will's shoulders, fingers threading through his hair. He tugs, lightly, and turns his head so he can kiss Will's hair, his purr gentle and warming Will to the bone.

The door opens, and Lisa comes out, looking a little frazzled and very well-kissed. She grins at them as they pull away, clasping her hands together and fitting them to her cheek. "You two are so cute," she coos, and Will flushes, rolling his eyes. "Shall we?"

Will nods, and follows her down to the car, Hannibal close behind. They don't take the minivan, but a small pickup truck that certainly looks like it's seen better days, and only has one bench seat that makes up places on which to perch. Will ends up sandwiched between Lisa and Hannibal, and rolls his eyes again when Hannibal happily settles an arm along the back of the seat, letting Will press as close as he likes.

Because there is no other Alpha or Omega present that can hear it, Will purrs, smiling when he feels Hannibal's answering rumble, and Hannibal's fingers brush, gently, over the back of his bitten and marked neck. Lisa turns the truck on, the engine giving a coughing series of groaning whirs before it starts, and they turn down the long driveway, leaving the house behind.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

~~~drama~~~

Lisa drives them to a large grocery store in the middle of a strip mall, and by the time they arrive, the sun is beating down on them like it has a personal vendetta against the flat, slate-grey buildings and the shiny hoods of various trucks and cars parked within the lot. Will can't remember seeing so many farming vehicles and off-roadsters in his life, and smiles to himself, thinking of the first dinner party he attended at Hannibal's home, where every car driven by his guests probably cost more than Will's house. Well, definitely his new house, since that came at a steal given its history, but even the higher-priced little white house he'd had in Wolf Trap would have looked at the payment on those cars and shuddered.

They clamber out of the truck as it settles and groans, Will breathing in a deep lungful of the muggy air. Lisa gives a complaining huff, tying her long hair up in a loose bun, and leads the way towards the grocery store. On a Saturday morning, the place is packed, but Will is good at navigating crowds, and Hannibal is good at having them part for him, so they find a cart easily and begin their foray into the depths of the store.

The first section is the fresh fruits and vegetables, and they gather celery, sweet onions, and red peppers. Will defers to Hannibal when making the particular selections of each vegetable, his chest warm with affection as Hannibal carefully procures each one, admiring and assessing it for any faults before adding them to the various plastic bags. "I assume you already have some of the things we'll need at home," Will tells Lisa.

She grins at him. "Seasoning, of course, and I have the herbs," she replies. Will nods, checking off his mental list for the ingredients as they head towards the meat section. He hasn't made jambalaya in so many years, but the list of necessary things come easily to him, as if he had just made a batch of it last week.

They gather chicken and andouille sausage, placing it in the cart. "So, Hannibal, Will mentioned you do most of the cooking?" Lisa asks. They have most of the necessities out of the way, and so Lisa takes over leading them through the crowded aisles, picking up whatever else she needs for the sake of feeding five hungry mouths. Will pushes the cart as she flits between the shelves.

Hannibal nods. "I've cooked most of my own meals since I was a boy," he replies. "Not to sound like a stereotype, but when one learns just how terribly a bad diet can affect the human body, one cannot help be careful about what they put into it."
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Lisa laughs, and winks at Will. "Well, if Will is anything like my husband, I'm sure you had your work cut out for you in the beginning. I don't think Chris had eaten anything but ramen and box meals until we moved in together."

Will laughs. "And whiskey."

"Oh, heavens! That whiskey," Lisa says, rolling her eyes and wrinkling her nose. "There's a brewery near here, that makes wonderful cherry beer, but that's about all I drink and only on occasion."

"Hannibal makes wine, too," Will says. "When you're up for the wedding you should try it. It's great."

Hannibal smiles at him, and Will shrugs. It's true – he's not in the habit of stroking Hannibal's ego but Hannibal is a good cook, of course he knows that. Still, there's no harm in talking up your mate to his future in-laws.

"Oh, I'd like that!" Lisa replies brightly, and turns to the next aisle. Halfway down, her phone rings, and she stops, fishing it out of her purse. "Hi babe," she greets, and then pauses, covering the mouthpiece. "Will, you know what? We'll need bay leaves. Do you mind?"

Will nods, and leaves the cart, heading back to the herbs and spices section near the fresh vegetables to gather it. He lingers, and on a whim, gets a bag of chili flakes as well. Might as well give the jambalaya an extra kick while he's making it.

He returns, and puts the items in the cart, tensing when he scents the worry pouring off of Lisa in waves. She's frowning at Hannibal, her eyes dark and her lips turned down at the corners, still listening to whatever Chris is telling her over the phone.

"He tried calling you," she says after a minute. "You didn't answer."

Will blinks. "My phone's in my suitcase," he replies. He didn't get it after he threw it there following Jack's phone call. "What's happening?"

Hannibal's hand settles lightly at the small of his back, and he leans in, turning his head so Lisa cannot see his lips move; "It sounds like your uncle is causing quite a fuss."

Will frowns, and resists the urge to roll his eyes. Clearly it's more than a fuss, if Lisa is looking at them like that.

She presses her lips together, and hands over the phone. "He wants to talk to you."

Will takes it, holding it to his ear. "Yeah?"

"Hey, Will." Chris' voice is low, and sharp. It's strange, hearing him say Will's actual name, hearing his voice sound so stern. He reminds Will, in that moment, of his uncle, and a small flicker of worry starts in his chest. "I, ah." Chris clears his throat. "I'm gonna ask you this once, and I really hope you're gonna be honest with me when you answer."

Will swallows. "What's going on?"

"My dad went through your guys' shit," Chris says, a small huff making his voice lighter, but only for a moment. Will frowns, glaring down at the cart. Beside him, Hannibal is utterly still, and Will wonders if he can hear Chris' voice over the phone too. "He found this book. These, ah, letters. Between you and your friend."

Every part of Will goes tense. His breath catches in his throat, and his heart goes still for just a moment. *Fuck*. It was stupid bringing the letters here, but Will wanted to bring them – he wasn't sure how his family would react, and he had wanted to have them with him, if only for some small measure of comfort. Stupid, a *stupid* thing to do.

"Okay," he says slowly, his mind racing. He can explain that. He can -.

"He found one of Hannibal's notebooks, too, I guess. Says the writing matches."

Oh, *fuck*.

Will wets his lips, breathes in as evenly and slowly as he can. "We can have this conversation face to face," he says.

"No, I think we need to have this conversation right the fuck now," Chris replies, his voice harsh, accent getting stronger from the force of it. He's sounding more and more like David by the minute. "Will, you're out there with a *murderer*."

God, *fuck*. Will can't have this talk right now. He can't do this in the middle of a fucking grocery store. "You read them," he says, and lifts his eyes to meet Hannibal's. His face is impassive, outwardly unbothered, but Will knows he understands exactly what Will is talking about. His eyes flash, and he presses his lips together, looking away.

"Yeah, I fucking read them," Chris snarls. His anger presses against Will, kneads at his flanks and claws at his head. He runs a hand through his hair – stay calm, stay fucking calm. "And maybe if I'd read them when you were a kid I could have -."

"Don't," Will says. "Don't say somethin' you're gonna regret."

"Oh, I'm gonna say plenty," Chris hisses. "But first you're going to bring my wife back to me safe and fucking sound. And I'm gonna stay on the phone the whole Goddamn time to make sure you do."

Will nods. "Okay," he murmurs, and hands the phone back. Lisa takes it, her eyes dark with worry and a heavy frown on her face. The expression looks so unnatural on her, and Will hates to be the one that put it there, however indirectly. He turns to look at Hannibal, finds his head tilted.

What now, daydreamer?

Will doesn't know.

"Okay," Lisa says. "I'll just -. Yeah, yeah, *okay*, jeez." She rolls her eyes at Will and Hannibal and offers them an apologetic smile. So, Chris isn't telling her what he found – well, Will

supposes he has that on his side. There's too much backstory here to explain over the phone. She huffs, and shoulders her purse. "I guess we have to go home."

"Let's put everything back, first," Hannibal suggests. He has a thin smile on his face now, something Will can see as being forcibly calm, but must appear reassuring enough to Lisa, for she happily agrees, helping to reshelf their stock before heading back to the fresh fruits and vegetables section. Will replaces the spices and, for lack of anything else do to, they simply put the bagged vegetables back with their cousins, still in the plastic.

Then, they put the cart back with the others and Lisa leads the way to the truck, still on the phone. Will grabs Hannibal's hand and laces their fingers together tightly, trying to recall all the French he's ever learned and remembered;

"David found the letters," he murmurs. Hannibal tilts his head. "Your notes, too. Matched the handwriting. He knows."

Hannibal's eyes darken, and he hums, squeezing Will's fingers gently. "How much does he know?" he replies, also in French – much smoother and nicer an accent than Will's, he sure.

"Well, he called you a -." Will frowns, he doesn't know the word. "He knew about John. His death. So I'm guessing he knows a lot of it."

Hannibal nods. They climb into the car, and Lisa seems still engrossed in her phone call, talking to Chris animatedly about any old thing. He's probably just trying to keep her talking, so that she remains calm and he knows the instant Will or Hannibal do something to her. Will hates that – he would *never* hurt her. He'd never hurt any of them.

Hannibal rests their laced hands on his thigh. "Do you have a plan?" he asks, still in French.

Will shakes his head. "Right now honestly I'm just trying to stay calm."

Hannibal nods, and lets out a soft, soothing purr, tightening his fingers. "Good," he replies. Will has to give him credit – he looks remarkably unruffled, totally at ease despite Will telling him that their secrets, their freedom, their entire way of life has just come under threat. Chris knows Hannibal *killed* someone. 'Why did I kill John?'. Not to mention the letters that followed it. Fuck, Will was so fucking *stupid*.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, and Will turns to look at him. It's hard to focus on him – panic is making his vision grey out at the edges, he doesn't feel like he can catch his breath. The wide, open sky above the Louisiana farmlands feels too big, this is too big, *Hannibal* -. "Will, look at me."

Will shakes his head. Closes his eyes. That's how children block the monsters out, right?

"Will," Hannibal says again, and cups his chin, forcing him to turn his head and meet his eyes. Will shivers, when Hannibal smiles at him, and subtly pulls Will to press his nose against Hannibal's neck. Will breathes in, expecting to smell worry, stress, maybe even anger. But no – Hannibal is calm. How can he be so fucking calm? Hannibal's hand threads through

his hair, kneading at the tense muscles in his neck, and Will takes in another greedy breath. "It's going to be okay, darling."

It's not, it's fucking not, there's absolutely no way it can be.

"If there's cops out there," he whispers. "You stay in the car. You leave. Promise me."

Hannibal sighs. He doesn't reply, but Will figures he knows the answer already. There's too much in there – yes, Shadow Man's letters, and his own by extension, never explicitly mention Hannibal's name, because Will never knew it. There's nothing in there to specifically target him, except for the fact that as Will got older, the letters evolved from an exchange of riddles to declarations of love. No sane man would expect Will to be in love with Hannibal *and* Shadow Man, for him to marry and mate with Hannibal while Shadow Man waited in the wings.

He might be sick – though he ate little, there's a hard knot in his stomach by the time the big barn and the house comes into view. There's no cop car outside yet, but Will wouldn't put it past David to wait until Hannibal was inside, and then call for whoever's in charge now. He thinks of Detective Rodriguez, that nice Omega who had told David they couldn't arrest a man for sending letters. Well, he's not just sending letters anymore, is he?

Even if they hadn't found Hannibal's notebook, the letters are too recent, noting timestamps in Will's life that track well into his adulthood. He's fucked, and he feels fucked right to the core.

They get out of the car and Chris rushes out, ending the call finally and practically dragging Lisa away from the two of them. "Get inside," he commands her, and she frowns at him, but obeys with another huff, waving with a bright smile towards Hannibal and Will, before turning and walking inside. That hard knot in Will's stomach shrivels and rolls with guilt.

Then, Chris levels his gaze on Will, and he looks so much like his father that Will feels like he's eleven years old all over again. Chris glares at him, and then glares at Hannibal, his expression one of such black rage that Will has never seen on him before.

"My dad's in there," he hisses, "ranting about how this predator went after my cousin, a boy I consider a little *brother*, and wrote him letters, and made him fall in love with him. And killed people. And is still writing letters to him."

Hannibal squeezes Will's hand, and lifts his chin.

Chris mimics him. "You have about two seconds to give me a good explanation for all this shit." He doesn't finish the threat – Will shivers, because he knows Chris is good at fighting, but he's a family man now, he's gentled with age. Hannibal *is* a predator, he's the apex of their species. He could destroy Chris without breaking a sweat.

And that's nothing to say of what Will might do, if he went for Hannibal anyway.

"Will told me about this friend of his," Hannibal says evenly. "When we first met. He told me he was still writing letters to him – I asked him to show them to me. I kept them, more out of

professional curiosity than anything else." Will blinks, swallows harshly. "Then, the letters stopped. Will began having nightmares."

Chris' eyes flash, and move to Will, and Will forces himself to meet his gaze. Wills Chris to believe, just fucking believe – no matter how ridiculous it seems.

Hannibal sighs, like this pains him to admit, and runs a hand over his face, his other hand gently brushing down Will's arm. It's the most human, the most physically emotive Will has seen him outside their bed, or a hunt. He didn't even know Hannibal could portray sheepishness like that. "I told him to keep writing to his friend, had him keep a journal, and act like it was a call and response. It seemed to help his nightmares." He looks at Will, and Will wants to flinch at the almost *betrayed* look Hannibal is sending him. "I had no idea that he started writing back."

Will stares at him. What is Hannibal…? Oh. *Oh*.

Will winces, runs a hand through his hair. "I was going to tell you," he says. Makes his voice hoarse, wrecked with guilt. "I know he's a bad man. I know he is. But I can't…." He shakes his head, swallows harshly, presses his free hand to his chest. "I can't stop myself."

He forces tears to his eyes, though it's not hard to imagine that ache – Shadow Man, gone forever, *God*, no, Will wouldn't survive that. Even the thought of it makes him tremble, and it's not entirely fake. He shakes his head. "I love him, Hannibal."

He has seen heartbreak on Hannibal's face before. He's been the cause of it – even though he knows this is…. Whatever this is, it's for Chris' sake, it still hurts him to see it. Hannibal turns his gaze away, swallows as if trying to compose himself, and looks at Chris again. Will chances a glance as well beneath his lashes, sees Chris looking strangely guilty, his shoulders dropped and his body relaxed from its aggressive stance.

He licks his lips, unsure, thrown off-balance. "It's really not you?" he asks weakly, like he can't quite believe it.

Hannibal tenses, his eyes tightening at the corners as though someone struck him across the face. Will wants to soothe him, so badly he feels like he might die if he doesn't, but he resists. "Perhaps it would be easier if it was," he says. "I had resigned myself to knowing that there were some parts of Will which he could never share with me. But I didn't…"

Will whines, soft and sharp. It's not true, it's *not true*. Will trembles as Hannibal releases his hand, and steps away.

"Forgive me," he says, wiping a hand over his face like he's trying to stop himself crying too. It's all fake, Will knows it has to be, but it still hurts to hear him say; "Perhaps it would be better if I leave."

"Hannibal," Will whispers, but Hannibal doesn't say anything. Doesn't even look at him. Is this how he felt, when Will turned his back? *God, Shadow Man, I'm so sorry*.

Chris clears his throat, and nods. "Lisa can call you a cab," he says gently, and Hannibal nods, giving him a gracious, strained smile. Chris steps back and lets him walk inside, and Will collapses, sinking back against the warm hood of the truck, and sobs. "Hey, Will, hey…"

"Don't touch me," Will snarls, and bares his teeth at Chris. Chris stills, and lets his hands drop where they'd been reaching out to soothe. "God, why did you do that? I had a handle on it – I…"

Some part of him thinks he should feel bad, for lying to Chris, for this entire façade. But he doesn't – maybe guilt was cut out of him when he was a kid, when he first started lying. Faking it for his family comes to him naturally, and he's angry, he's *pissed*, that Chris would ever dare threaten his mate, or threaten Will's happiness, no matter what the reason was.

Chris, to his credit, looks incredibly guilty. Will feels nothing, looking at it. "Fuck," he mutters, and runs a hand through his hair. "Look, I didn't know. I just…. Christ, Will, you're like my baby brother. I thought he'd…"

"I know what you thought," Will snarls. "Hannibal's been nothing but good to me. He's the best damn thing that's ever happened to me and now he's -." He stops. He can't make himself say it, even for the sake of their cover. No, Hannibal isn't leaving him. Not really. It's all part of the game.

Still, it hits him like a stab in the gut when Hannibal emerges from the house again, his bag packed and dragging behind him, looking inconsolably sad. He's with Lisa, and she has a hand on his arm, gesturing frantically. Probably trying to convince him to stay, to talk about it. Hannibal smiles at her, and shakes his head.

She swallows, and looks at Will, and Will hates the look in her eyes. Pitying. Sad. Accusing. "I'm going to drive Hannibal to the airport," she announces, and Chris nods. He presses his lips together and runs both hands through his hair as Lisa leads the way to the minivan, opens it to let Hannibal set his luggage inside, and they both get in. Will can't make himself look away, even though he knows Hannibal won't break character until they're in the clear.

He clenches his fists, and marches into the house with a growl.

David is there, looking remarkably pleased with himself. He grins at Will. "See?" he crows, sounding delighted. "Now if you'd had an Omega like a normal man, you'd have the balls to make him stay."

Will snarls. Loudly, his Voice thrumming in his throat. "Shut your fucking mouth," he hisses. David blinks at him, his eyes widening, and Will snarls again, turning away before he does anything drastic. He goes to the craft room and closes the door behind him, falling to his knees in front of his closed suitcase. He opens it frantically.

The book is still there – thank fucking God. Clearly Hannibal managed to convince David to part from it. He takes it with shaking hands, opens it, and turns to the last page to see a page torn from Hannibal's notebook, marked with his familiar, arcing script;

"An experiment gone unfortunately awry, but at least we can say we tried. I'll see you at home, my daydreamer."

Will lets out a shaken breath, relieved beyond measure to read the words. He knew it was a façade, he knew it was fake, but seeing it confirmed for him anyway settles him, just like Hannibal would, like a touch in his hair and a purr against his neck.

He tucks the page into one of the empty liners, and buries the book in his suitcase, sealing the zip. He stands, and searches through the craft drawers until he finds a small padlock, and pulls out just enough clothes for him to change into and head to the airport, before he locks the suitcase tight.

Fuck David. Fuck this farm and this state and anyone who would damn him and Hannibal for what they are. These people aren't home, they aren't his family – his family left, he's gone home, and Will wants nothing more than to follow.

He changes clothes and leaves the room, suitcase in tow. Doesn't look at David, or the girls. Chris is still outside, pacing and stinking of guilt. He stops, and turns when Will emerges.

"I'm going after him," Will says.

Chris nods, fishing his keys from his pocket, and leads the way to the truck. Will throws his suitcase into the bed of it, and climbs back in, aching when he can smell Hannibal's scent clinging to the faux leather seat.

Chris breathes out, starting the engine. "Will."

"What," Will replies, sitting back and closing his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Chris whispers, and Will huffs, turning his face away. "I didn't know, I didn't -." He shakes his head, Will can see him do it in the reflection on the glass, as they turn and begin the drive down to the road. "But you can't just -. Fuck's sake, kid, you can't keep goin' on like this. Hannibal doesn't deserve that."

Will barks a harsh laugh. Oh, if only Chris knew. He closes his eyes again, and sighs. "Just drive."

The drive is silent, and Will gets out once they pull up to the curb for the departures. Chris runs his hand over the back of his neck, looking guilty again, and surprises Will by pulling him into a tight hug. Despite himself, Will hugs back.

"I know I fucked up," Chris murmurs to his hair. "But if…. If things work out, I'd still love to come up for the wedding."

Will sighs. He must release some of his anger. He'll see Hannibal soon. "If it works out," he says, because he's not without pettiness, and Chris nods, pressing his lips together. His phone

chimes, and he looks down.

"Lisa was just here," he says, and meets Will's eyes again. "You can still catch him if you hurry. Good luck, shrimp."

Will nods, and turns away without a word. He hurries inside, wincing at the cacophony of people and scents that assault him once in – the combination of Alphas, Omegas, and women all in various stage of travel-related anxiety, the dust-heavy scent of air conditioning doing its best to combat the oppressive Louisiana heat.

But through it all, *Hannibal*. Bright, like a string of gold, guiding him towards the ticket check-in counters. He could hunt Hannibal blind, in complete darkness. He could find him like a homing beacon, a thrumming in his chest that demands he give chase.

He finds Hannibal by one of the self-serve kiosks, and watches as Hannibal's shoulders tense in awareness, his head lifts, and he turns, finding Will in the crowd. He gives Will a warm, welcoming smile, and Will shivers and goes to him, unable to deny the urge to practically drop his bag and bury his face in Hannibal's neck, breathing him in deeply.

Hannibal is purring, and wraps an arm around his shoulders. "I wouldn't have minded if you wanted to stay the full weekend," he says.

Will shakes his head, bares his teeth. He doesn't care if people are watching. He pulls back just enough to nuzzle Hannibal's jaw, kiss warm and wide along it, and then he cups Hannibal's nape and kisses him deeply, pressing as close as he can.

"You're my family," he breathes, and Hannibal's eyes flash, darken, the ring of red within them warm enough that Will could find solace in it, in the deepest freeze. "I don't want to be anywhere you're not."

"In that, we are perfectly matched," Hannibal replies, and ducks his head down to steal another kiss. Will smiles when he pulls back, and turns his attention to the screen of the kiosk. Despite Hannibal's words, he notes that there are two tickets in the process of being purchased, and he huffs a laugh, and looks at Hannibal with a raised brow. Hannibal smiles back at him, unrepentant, and completes the transaction, and they gather their tickets and head towards the baggage drop-off, eager to leave the whole ordeal behind.

They land in Baltimore without trouble, gather their bags, and head to Hannibal's house, since it's closer and Will is so abruptly tired. He arranged with Elijah to check in on the dogs through Monday, and since he has no intention of going to Jack before then either, he's more than happy to simply be in Hannibal's home, ready to enjoy his mate for a whole uninterrupted day.

Hannibal takes his coat when they enter, and they discard their shoes and bring their suitcases upstairs. A lot of Will's stuff is here, to suit the week he spent before going on their trip. He

only pauses long enough to text Chris that they'd both arrived safely, before he turns off his phone and tosses it back in the suitcase.

Hannibal comes to him, then, cupping his face and kissing him. Will growls, pawing at Hannibal's hips, bringing their bodies close together. "You performed wonderfully, darling," Hannibal murmurs, soft with praise, with adoration. "Just as I knew you would."

Will shivers, and shakes his head. "I don't want to talk about that," he hisses. Even the reminder is enough for him to bare his teeth, to tremble and claw at his mate's flanks. To think that Shadow Man, or Hannibal, would leave him if they were two separate people – to think that he could not have both…. No. No, he refuses to think about it, to even consider it as a possibility.

He kisses, fierce and hard enough to earn a rumble from Hannibal, and he pushes at Hannibal's clothes, until his chest is bare, and Will grabs him, turns him and pushes him onto the bed, climbing in right after so he can straddle Hannibal's thighs.

"You're mine," he snarls, and Hannibal looks up at him like he would die before he was anyone else's. It soothes, but Will doesn't want to be soothed. He wants to take, wants Hannibal to want him, to bite him and put claw marks in his back and teeth in his neck. He cups Hannibal's face and kisses him again, rolls his hips so his erection ruts against Hannibal's, and growls when Hannibal paws at his thighs and helps him spread, helps him come closer.

He rears up, yanking his t-shirt over his head and throwing it to one side, purring when Hannibal's hands flatten on his chest, raking down. Hannibal needs it, too – he can see it. He pulls back just long enough to shed his jeans and underwear, pleased when Hannibal does the same, and when they return, it's only skin and claws and teeth, rough growls given and swallowed down.

Hannibal grips his back, digs his nails into Will's shoulders, and Will moans, breathless, his belly tight with desire as he drops a hand and wraps it around their cocks, pushing sensitive flesh together and stroking. He kisses again, then parts for air, spits on the fingers of his free hand and reaches back to slick himself open.

Hannibal is staring at him, surprisingly passive, his fingers flexing on Will's back and his lashes dipping low as Will touches them both, squeezes the leaking head of Hannibal's cock and uses the slick to help the glide. He wants to roll Will, wants to spread him open and mount him properly, but he's resisting the urge. Will sees it, he sees all of it.

He nudges their foreheads together, their noses brushing. Licks at Hannibal's open mouth and smiles when he snarls. He pauses only long enough for more spit, reaching back and forcing his wet fingers inside himself. He hisses – it's been a while, long enough for him to get tight and dry again. It's going to hurt. Will wants it to hurt.

"You're mine," he whispers again, and the red in Hannibal's eyes flares sharply. "Every piece of you is mine. Has been from the beginning, hasn't it?"

"*Yes*," Hannibal breathes, raking his claws down Will's back – eight lines of fire that make Will moan, pressing his forehead to Hannibal's more harshly, pleased when Hannibal meets him, fights him, stays upright. Hannibal is not an Omega, Will would love him even if he was, but Shadow Man is a predator. Shadow Man is absolute, all-consuming. "Just as you are mine, aren't you."

He doesn't ask it as a question. Will growls, pulls his fingers out and cups Hannibal's neck as Hannibal claws at him again. "I belong to both of you," he says. Hannibal lifts his eyes, meets his gaze. "The man everyone else sees, the monster I see. Both parts of you, that I love."

He lets go of his own cock, spreads more of Hannibal's precum on his, and pulls himself forward by the hand on Hannibal's neck, lifts to his knees and guides Hannibal to his entrance. Hannibal snarls, shows his teeth, moans softly as Will sinks down. It hurts, it's sudden and fierce and everything Will loves about his beautiful, savage mate. He forces himself to take all of it, the ache blooming in his stomach like he's been punched.

He kisses, then, because he will die if Hannibal keeps looking at him like that and he doesn't reward him with a kiss. It is that which breaks Hannibal of his control, releases his reins and lets him run. He grips Will tight to him and rolls them, plants Will on his back on the bed and thrusts savagely. A punched-out moan has only a moment of life before Hannibal swallows it, ravenous, and Will wraps his legs high on his mate's back, arches up so Hannibal can lift his hips and claw at his back, and lets him go.

He bites, teeth sinking into Hannibal's neck hard enough to raise a welt, matching the older ones splayed across his shoulders and throat. A collection of timestamps that mark every time Hannibal has let Will this close, to the pieces of him most vulnerable. How could anything else compare to the feeling of having a monster like Shadow Man so eagerly bare his neck? Nothing could, nothing at all.

Will threads both hands through Hannibal's hair, holds him still, suckles a deep bruise to his mate's skin as Hannibal snarls, fucking him hard enough the mattress groans in protest and the bed creaks. One of Hannibal's hands drags out, creates a musical score just waiting to be given notes, and curls between their bellies, wrapping around Will's cock and stroking a fast counter-rhythm.

Will gasps, clenching his eyes shut as Hannibal holds him up, curls him, angles him perfectly so he gets friction against his prostate. He knows Will's body, every nerve and blood vessel and line of muscle imprinted on him. Will lets out a weak sound, strung too high for too long, too desperate for release – he tenses up and comes over Hannibal's hand, slicking their bellies together. Hannibal snarls, proud and purring, and wraps his fingers around the semi-bulge of Will's knot, teasing it into swelling for just a little longer, so Will's pleasure lasts. Will jerks, his legs falling limp, clutching at Hannibal weakly as Hannibal touches him.

Then, Hannibal releases his cock, planting his hand by Will's head on the bed. His hand stinks of Will's seed, slick and whitish, and he slows, grinding to a softer, deeper rhythm that feels like it's hitting Will in his throat.

"Will," he breathes, nuzzling Will's neck, parting his jaws to kiss open-mouthed and warm over Will's hammering pulse. "I could not love you any more than I already do, and yet every

part of me aches to try."

Will shivers, closing his eyes as Hannibal's cock grinds mercilessly against his prostate, making his stomach tense, his lungs heaving as he tries to catch his breath.

"I confess, some dark piece of me wants to take you away from this place. Forever," Hannibal continues, kissing the words to Will's neck. "To go to Italy, or Spain, or France, and bathe you in gold, and have you all to myself for the rest of our lives."

Will sucks in a breath, gasping, clawing at Hannibal's shoulders, up into his hair. And he might be completely insane, because the vision Hannibal is spinning sounds perfect to him. He can only let out a soft, adoring sound in answer, his head on fire under Hannibal's heat and weight, his body aching, desperate.

Hannibal shudders, pushes his dirty hand through Will's hair, his other gripping Will's hip tightly to hold him still. He bites, at the same time Will spasms, oversensitive, and Hannibal forces his knot into Will's body. He comes with another shiver, heavy and warm, and licks over the mark he left.

Will turns his head, kisses him until they're both breathless. "I'll go," he says. Hannibal blinks, lifting his head, meeting his eyes. "I'll go. Name the place. I'll go with you."

Hannibal blinks at him again, tilts his head. He pets, absently, through Will's hair, parts his lips to wet them, and smiles. "I think I know just the one."

Will doesn't reach back out to his family. Mostly because he's occupied with other things – Hannibal, for much of it. In his bed, in his study, at his table. He does end up making jambalaya, because Hannibal is insistent when it comes to his curiosity, and he cannot help feeling a distinct pleasure when Hannibal tastes it, and gives him a warm, approving nod.

"You certainly like it spicy," he says.

Will grins, and winks. "Only way to make it," he replies, earning a laugh. He puts Hannibal's book back on the shelf and though his eyes wander to it often, he doesn't take it back out.

And then it's Monday, and Will wakes to that knowledge like a man eyes the gallows. He sighs, rolls over, and buries his nose in Hannibal's neck with a complaining huff. Hannibal wakes, if he wasn't already awake, and laughs warmly, nuzzling Will's hair.

"Would you like me to come with you?"

Will shakes his head. He knows Hannibal is probably antsy to get back to his normal routine, despite how much he enjoys having Will around. There's laundry to do, dishes to clean, shelves to dust, and minds to heal.

He steals a kiss before he heads to the shower, and grins when Hannibal merely follows him in without a word. He calls Elijah when he's dressed and ready to head to Quantico, to thank him for taking care of the dogs and to let him know Will would be home that night, to pick them up.

"Awesome!" Elijah replies. "Molly was going to make a big dinner for us. Would you and Hannibal like to join?"

Will presses his lips together, lifts his eyes as Hannibal appears as if summoned. "I'll ask him," he says, and mutes the phone. "Elijah invited us over for dinner tonight. Can you make it or are you busy?"

Hannibal's head tilts, his eyes lifting as he runs through the list of appointments and meetings in his head. "I may be late," he replies, apologetic. "But I should be able to be there at half-seven, if traffic is kind."

Will nods, and unmutes the phone. "Yeah, I can be there. Hannibal will too, but he might be later than me."

"No problem, we'll make sure to save some for him," Elijah replies. "Does seven work?"

"Sure," Will says, and nods. He exchanges a set of 'Goodbye's, and hangs up the phone with a sigh. He checks his watch – no doubt Jack will start to be on the lookout for him. Though Will never told him what time his flight originally was meant to be, Jack's made it no secret he tracks Will's movements, and he's sure Jack knows exactly when Will *was* going to be back in town.

He stands with a sigh, and smiles when Hannibal nuzzles his hair, kissing under his ear. "Guess I'll see you tonight?" he says.

Hannibal nods, a soft purr rumbling in his chest. "May the hour come swiftly," he murmurs. Will's smile widens, and he turns to steal one more kiss from his mate, before he shoulders his bag, dons his coat like armor, and leaves to his car.

Will hates everything about Quantico. It's a separate building from the FBI University where he teaches, and much more of an eyesore. He hates the jutting spear that marks the place. He hates how close the forest creeps around the edges to the drive-in. He hates how many checkpoints there are and how many curious looks he gets.

He hates that it's underground, feels oppressive and humid to his neck when he gets a visitor's badge and is made to wait in a little antechamber for Jack. Before, he could have just walked right in, but not anymore. He drums his fingers on his knees and sighs, wondering if he could just up and leave and not have Jack follow him like a persistent birddog.

Jack appears, in that same way he always does – with a bluster and darkening the doorway. Will looks up and tries to keep his face neutral as Jack smiles at him, wide, wide, like a father who had to hear the speech from his son about how he could make it on his own, only to have him return home, tail tucked, a week later.

"Hey, Will," he greets, warmly enough. Will stands, and avoids Jack's eyes as Jack turns and leads him into the main offices. Jack's office is on the second floor, and he follows Jack up the stairs, wrinkling his nose at the scent of gunpowder and toner in the air.

Jack leads him to his office and opens the door without flair, letting Will inside. Will frowns, and tries to think of the last time he was in this office – it must have been after…. After Abigail. Yes, with the corkboard on the wall with all those *Mall of America* girls. Taken down, the last time he was here, since they solved the case. The day Jack ordered Will go through a mandatory psychiatric evaluation.

His mouth twists. Well, he supposes that part worked out pretty well for him. The first domino in a long line to fall, to get Will where he is now.

There are new faces on the corkboard. Each pinned with string to a location centered around Baltimore and Northern Virginia. Will recognizes the old file of the Turners, takes in Eva Kingsley's mugshot, a photo of Dillon Price above the rest of his slaughtered family. Looks like a school photo.

He makes himself look, gravitating towards the corkboard. He lifts his hand, absently thumbing at one of the strings.

"Jesse Turner," he murmurs, refamiliarizing himself with the child's name. "C.J. Lincoln. Connor Frist." In the bottom corner, Christopher O'Halloran. That family had survived, though – the FBI had intervened before Christopher could shoot. "And now Dillon Price."

Jack makes a soft sound of assent behind him. "The newest file is the Kikers," he says, and Will turns to him, watches as Jack comes forward, and pins up a new set of photographs. "Mother, father, two daughters killed. Alex Kiker, an Alpha, was reported missing a year prior. He's probably the one who killed the mother, if the M.O. stays the same."

Will doesn't want to look. He does. It's almost disappointing how similar they are – what happened to the imagination of the youth?

"So they're collecting Alphas now," Will murmurs. "Mates? Brothers who can protect them?"

Jack hums.

"Have you spoken to Eva?"

"Yes. She had nothing important to say."

Will arches a brow. "Well, it's not like you could compel her, even with a Voice." He sighs. "One advantage of being a woman." His head tilts. "They keep targeting Alpha-female pairs.

One of the boys must have a Voice by now, if they're operating entirely without a female presence."

Jack nods, in his periphery. Will eyes the marked pins on the map – all within thirty miles or so of each other. "They're sticking close to home," he adds. "Makes sense. Not like they can risk flying, or driving too far." He tilts his head. "The Omegas are all old enough to have licenses now, aren't they?"

"Jesse Turner is the only one who has a registration with the DMV," Jack replies. "His foster family got him licensed. We have street cops looking for him, but right now it's any combination of young boys. Doesn't exactly narrow down the suspect pool."

Will nods.

"What are you thinkin'?"

"Eva's motivation for doing what she did was building her family," Will replies. "She saw the birth family as a threat, and so groomed her children to love her, and their brothers instead, to trust only them, and then when they were ready, she had the other family killed." His head tilts, looking at Dillon's photo. He's a sallow-looking boy, with dark brown eyes and black hair, a long face, just a little baby fat still clinging. "When Eva was arrested, I think those boys similarly rejected their new family, and sought each other out again."

He looks at Jack. "Are they all missing from their foster homes?"

"Jesse got emancipated," Jack says, his face glowering and stern. "Though C.J. and Connor, yes. Though they were perfectly happy to keep collecting the Federal checks." Will presses his lips together so he doesn't laugh. "I'm surprised – I would have expected them to come back for Christopher. He's the one that got away."

"Are the family still living here?" Will asks.

Jack nods. Will blows out a breath, but before he can ask, Jack says; "I have a protective detail watching out for them. Until these boys are caught."

Will nods.

"They're collecting Alphas now, Jack," he says. "They have two. They need a third." Jack turns his head, staring at the side of Will's face. "Once each of them has a mate they can share Voices with, they might come back for Christopher. Or they might move on. I don't…" He swallows, frowning. "I don't know what the endgame is. What number would satisfy them."

"From what I got from Eva, she would have kept going until she was caught."

"No," Will replies. He lifts his hand and touches the photographs of the Kiker murders again. "No…"

He tilts his head.

"They all had three children," he murmurs. "Every family. Even the first one Eva took when it would have just been her and C.J., they all had three children. That number must be important to them."

"Three Omegas, three Alphas," Jack adds, nodding absently. "So, they need one more."

"How old is Christopher, now?"

"Must be…seventeen? Eighteen?" Presented already, then. Too old – the rest of the boys were taken before that age. Will huffs a frustrated breath, shoving his hands into his pockets, his shoulders rolling.

"We don't know enough about their selection process or their location to lay a trap," Will says. Jack rubs a hand over his mouth – he's probably had this internal argument countless times. "All we know is they're targeting pre-presenting Alphas from multi-child households with an Alpha-female parent pair."

"Yeah, you don't want to hear the number for how many there are in a thirty mile radius of Baltimore and D.C.," Jack says darkly. Will swallows.

"How many young Alphas have gone missing in the last year?" he asks. "They're killing close together – if they're following in their mother's footsteps, that gives us a week, maybe two, around when Dillon and Alex first were reported missing."

Jack presses his lips together, his eyes moving to the board. "I don't know," he admits, and Will wants to roll his eyes. Of course he doesn't know, of course he wouldn't think to look. "But I can have someone run that."

Will nods. He shivers when the air conditioning kicks in, and folds his arms across his chest.

"Well," he says quietly. "I think…that's all I'm gonna be able to give you today."

Jack nods. "I'll let you know what we find." Will winces, and wants to snap that he doesn't want to know – he's done his part, and it's over. But it's not over – it won't be, it won't ever be. Will can't claw himself all the way out, it's so easy to sink back into the mindset, the chase. Alphas are prideful, and Will, well, he's the damn best at what he does. He's not above that kind of pride.

He thinks of Hannibal's words – of going far away, and only being in each other's company – and smiles.

"Thank you, Will," Jack says, and claps a hand on his shoulder. Will winces again, and resists the urge to shrug him off. Jack walks him out, and he does look genuinely grateful for Will's help. Will can't fault him for being relieved to have his one-trick pony back in the stables.

He leaves Quantico in a hurry – it's almost four, and if traffic is kind he'll make it back to Harrogate by the skin of his teeth. He gets into his car and speeds away.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> I'm going to warn you guys that there's graphic murder in this chapter of some ambiguously-aged people (they're all teenagers but like, some of them are still young). And Will gets kinda dark as well and I think that's very sexy of him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It occurs to Will as he's driving that he hasn't actually spent time with anyone except Hannibal and his blood relatives since the night he had dinner with Molly. When he took Wally fishing out on the lake. It causes a subtle but pervasive unease in him, to be going there now – to anyone on the outside looking in, he would appear as any Alpha of the household, coming home from a long day's work to a home-cooked meal with his wife, son, and mother in law. Knowing Hannibal will eventually show up soothes that ache somewhat, but still it persists, so that by the time he crosses the bridge over the bay and sees the outskirts of Harrogate approaching him, he feels almost nauseous with anxiety.

Perhaps Hannibal was right – they could both do with a long vacation, away from the rest of the world, with only each other for company. As a kid, he wanted nothing more than for Shadow Man to appear to him, to whisk him away from the humdrum and monotonous plodding of his life. He is glad for Alana, and Margot, and the friends he has made here, but he has yet to find a place that feels as much like home, that settles him as much as simply being with Hannibal does.

He pulls up beside Molly's truck with a sigh, killing the engine, and smiles when their Husky mix comes barreling out to him in greeting. "Hey darlin'," he murmurs, petting her sleek head, and walks towards the door, giving it a cursory knock. The screen is closed, but the door is open, which allowed the dog to come outside. He keeps his fingers in her collar as he sees Molly approach the door.

"Hey, Will!" she greets brightly, wiping off her hands as Will leads the dog back inside, shutting the door behind him. "Come on in, dinner's almost ready. Can I get you anything? I have beer, and wine, juice, water…"

"I'll take a beer," he replies, and she nods, disappearing into the kitchen and reappearing with an open bottle, which she hands to him. Will takes a sip, humming at the full, hoppy taste. Again, he realizes he has never actually been inside Elijah's house, though the garden is a familiar sight to him now. There are pictures on the walls, all in various combinations of Molly, Wally, and Elijah. There's a photo of most of the town outside the church, a banner for last year's Fall Festival over their heads. He smiles. "What are we having?"

"I made turkey," Molly replies, and Will arches a brow. "'Tis the season!"

"I guess," he says with a laugh, and follows her into the depths of the house. It smells, oddly, a lot like his own – sweeter notes of Omega and child, but over all of it, dog and firepits and, of course, the scent of the roasting bird. The house reminds him a lot of Deborah's, with its kitschy antiques and knickknacks on the shelves, a small collection of books beside the fireplace in the living room, the open-air plan that allows a lot of natural sunlight to flood the space.

Elijah is in the kitchen, and looks up when Will enters, giving him a warm, welcoming smile, the gold in his eyes shining prettily in the sunlight. "Hi, Will," he greets happily. He's drinking a beer of his own, reclining against the big cabinet opposite the fridge.

"Hey," he replies, lifting his bottle in a greeting salute. He takes another drink. "Can I help with anything?"

"We're good," Elijah replies. "How was your trip?"

Will winces internally, and hides it behind another sip of beer. "About what I expected," he replies, the lie coming easily, and Elijah's eyes soften in sympathy. "My cousin was alright, but his dad, my uncle, he's always been a little more traditional, so." He lifts his shoulder in a shrug.

"I'm sorry about that," Elijah says quietly. He sighs, and shakes his head. "I can sympathize. My parents and all their friends wanted me to mate again after John died, but I refused. Besides, I had Molly." He shrugs as well, and Will swallows, because he knows exactly what kind of *reputation* unmated Omegas with a child, especially one as young as Elijah, must have had back in the day.

But he must admit, it settles him to hear Elijah speak his name. He can remember a time when it was impossible for him to do so.

"Where's Wally?" he asks, noting the absence of the boy.

"He's out in the park with some friends he met. They're coming to dinner too," Molly replies with a bright smile. She opens the oven, letting out another fresh, heavy waft of the roasting meat, and slides oven mitts over her hands, taking out the large roasting pan. She lifts the lid, revealing the golden-brown skin of the bird, the thick moat of juice sloshing around it, and gives a satisfied hum. She places a meat thermometer in the breast, and nods when it ticks up to 175. "Perfect."

Will takes in a deep breath. Hannibal is an amazing cook, but he'll admit sometimes he just wants to eat the more socially acceptable kind of meat. Not that Hannibal doesn't provide that as well, but it's much rarer than when Will was cooking for himself.

Elijah straightens, and sets his beer bottle down, turning and opening the cabinet to retrieve plates and utensils. Will sets his own bottle down as well, and goes to help him. Elijah takes out six plates in total, and Will takes them from him, following once he grabs enough forks and knives, and goes to the dining room. It's a small room, much smaller than Hannibal's dining room, and the table is easily large enough to accommodate ten people, so there is not a

lot of space around it to navigate, but they manage, and set three plates on either side of the table, leaving the heads of it empty save for the chairs.

The doorbell rings, and Will lifts his head, frowning as he scents the air. Elijah goes to the door, and Will tilts his head, breathing in again. The door opens, letting in Wally's scent, as well as another – just one other, though it is rich with the different notes that hint at a close-knit family.

It is also very *familiar*.

He's still trying to place it when Wally enters the dining room, and none other than Dillon Price follows him in. Will blinks, doing his best to hide his shock, but he can't help staring at the young Alpha as he follows on Wally's heels. Elijah doesn't seem to know who he is, but Will does – he fucking does. Dillon looks exactly like his photo, though he's taller than Will anticipated, already well over six foot. His hair has been cut shorter, and dyed at the tips to look blonde, and there's a bite mark on his neck that looks remarkably fresh, and red in his eyes.

Fresh Alpha, newly presented. And undoubtedly bonded to one of his brothers.

Will swallows, and straightens, running a hand through his hair. He has to think quickly – he should call Jack, but Jack wouldn't possibly get here in time. It's almost seven, and so Hannibal would be here sooner, but he doesn't know if him coming would sway the odds in their favor. He has no doubt that if Dillon is here, Jesse, Connor, Alex, and C.J. are not far behind.

Fuck. What the fuck are they doing here?

"Will!" Wally greets brightly. He's the only Alpha present, though he's still a kid, but seems happy enough to make introductions. "This is my friend, Dillon. Dillon, this is Will. He's a friend of my mom's and grandma's."

"Pleased to meet you," Dillon replies, holding out his hand to shake. He has the sullen voice of a youngster, the same kind of boy who would complain whenever his parents bothered him while he was holed away in his room. Will swallows, and shakes his hand across the table. Dillon looks…almost nervous, and his hand is clammy and cold.

"And you," Will says, trying to keep his voice as neutral as possible. He looks Dillon over, searching for the telltale bulge of a weapon, but sees none. He doesn't want to leave Elijah, Molly, and Wally alone, but he needs to let Hannibal know Dillon is here. He manages a warm smile and sends it Elijah's way. "Where's your bathroom?"

"First door on the left," Elijah replies, pointing back towards the kitchen. Will nods, and leaves the room, slipping into the bathroom and turning on the fan and light, so that he can speak lowly and hopefully not be overheard.

He pulls out his phone, and calls Hannibal. A few rings later, Hannibal picks up, the soft whir of his car's air conditioning telling Will he's already on his way.

"Hello, darling," he greets. "I'm about forty minutes away. Please give Elijah and Molly my sincerest apologies."

"We have a problem," Will murmurs. He tilts his head, tries to listen for the door, for a scuffle. He can't hear anything over the fan. "Dillon Price is here."

Hannibal is quiet for a moment, and then Will hears the rev of his engine gain pitch as he steps on the gas. "And the rest?"

"I haven't seen them yet, but they can't be far behind," Will says. His mind is racing, trying to remember all the details of the previous slaughters. He has no reason to think the self-made pack didn't enter all at once, but maybe this is one of the ways they have to do things now, without their mother – plant a mole, get in with the family, welcomed to dinner, and leave the entrance open for the rest to come in.

But this is different. Wally is an only child, and he wasn't taken a year prior. Molly has no Alpha -.

Except she does. Will hisses, pinching the bridge of his nose. Of course – anyone on the outside looking in would think they were the perfect nuclear family. They could have easily become a target if the boys think Will and Molly are married, that Wally is Will's son. They could have been watching for some time; watched Will teach Wally how to fish, watched them share meals together. Watched Will leave his dogs with his 'mother in law' while he was away. *Fuck*.

"This is decidedly outside their normal practice," Hannibal says, forcibly light. Will isn't sure if he's trying to keep Will calm, or himself calm, but he can hear Hannibal's car whining as he forces it to a higher speed, impatient to arrive. "Is Dillon armed?"

"Not that I can see," Will replies. "But they might not have been able to get him a weapon. He's young enough and friendly enough to infiltrate on his own, I guess." With his own pack of brothers, three of whom are Omega, he doesn't doubt Wally had nothing to fear from them. Just boys being boys, isn't that how the saying goes?

He's taking too long in the bathroom, and he knows it, feels the bracing protectiveness in his chest that urges him to go back and make sure no harm is coming to the family who have, for so many years, been bonded to him. Deeper than they know.

"I have to go back out," Will whispers.

Hannibal lets out a soft, impatient sound – frustrated, for yes, he knows Will can't just stay in the bathroom and let them remain in danger. Thankfully Will has the advantage, though they might not know it – he doesn't feel any true familial bond to these people, he would not just submit to save their lives. He will fight if he has to. Kill if he must. And he has a Voice, which they might not expect.

"I'll be there as soon as I can, darling," Hannibal breathes. "Be safe."

Will nods, and ends the call. He flushes the toilet for the sake of appearances, washes his hands, and by the time he emerges, he has plastered a calm smile on his face, forced any distress down to the pit of his stomach so it does not change his scent. He's good at pretending; he's had to do it all his life.

He retrieves his beer from the kitchen and finds everyone sitting at the table. Elijah is at the top right, Molly across from him, Wally beside her and Dillon completing the line. Will circles the table and takes his place next to Elijah, opposite Wally. It doesn't escape him that Dillon is the one with his eyes on the door.

But Dillon is not looking at the door. His eyes are on Will, dark and red-lined. "So, Dillon," Will says, as Elijah stands and begins to carve the turkey, and Molly dishes out a hearty offering of potatoes and broccoli as accompaniments. "Do your folks live around here, or…?"

Dillon shakes his head, and gives Molly a thankful smile as she hands his plate back. "No, sir," he says, and Will wants to wince at the title, but he supposes it fits – Dillon thinks he's the head of the household, and is showing respect, as is expected of him. "I'm actually from Baltimore, originally. My family moved out here last week." He gives Will a cheeky grin, rolling his eyes. "Dad fancies himself a fisherman."

Will smiles, though it's weak. "Well, there's plenty of places for him to practice here," he says, and thanks Molly with a nod as she hands him his plate. They settle, and begin to eat, not waiting for Will – he wouldn't expect them to, though he's quick to snag himself a bite of potatoes first so that it looks proper. Alphas normally take the first bite, but with Wally still so young and neither Elijah nor Molly having had Alphas in their lives for so long, he doesn't fault them the disregard for that archaic rule. "I fish a lot, myself. Tell your father I'm more than happy to help him get his sea legs."

Dillon's eyes flash, and he nods, slicing off a bite of turkey and eating it, his eyes closing in a brief show of pleasure. "This is delicious, Missus Foster," he says, all the world a polite and respectful young Alpha.

Molly smiles at him. "Thank you, Dillon," she replies brightly.

Dillon smiles, and Will's stomach tenses at the sight of it. He could have been such a nice young man, and he's doing a good job of playing the role. Will cannot help but see blood on his hands, smeared across his mouth. Can't help look at him and picture him with a face of ice and pressing the muzzle of a gun against his mother's forehead.

His upper lip twitches, and he takes a drink before he can snarl. He can't see a clock from where's he's sitting, and doesn't want to check his watch and tip Dillon off. He tries to remember how many minutes have passed since he ended his call with Hannibal. Even if he were driving at top speed, he's still a good half hour out.

He has to warn them. He has to find a way to let them know something's amiss, before the rest of the boys show up.

Dillon's eyes fall to the empty plate beside Will, and his head tilts. "Are we expecting someone else?" he asks, voice carefully neutral.

Before anyone can reply, Will clears his throat, and puts a hand over Elijah's. Meets Molly's eyes across the table. "Yes," he says emphatically. "We're waiting for John."

Molly's brow creases, and he can feel Elijah tensing up beside him, but they don't otherwise react. Wally looks up, frowning heavily, and Will nudges his foot under the table, gives a small shake of his head, and continues; "He's a friend of Molly's. He comes to dinner with us a lot."

Dillon hums, a subtly tense set to his shoulders. He takes another bite of food and says, coolly; "It's rude to be late."

Will smiles. "Yes, well, as I understand it, he's been very busy working with the FBI." Dillon *does* react at that, lowering his knife and fork and blinking at Will. Will turns to Elijah and Molly, adding lightly; "Have you heard about all these terrible murders happening recently? Apparently, there's been quite a surge."

Elijah clears his throat. "Oh?"

Will nods. "Families killed during dinner, their children taken. Targeting Alpha-female pairs with young male children." He meets Molly's eyes again, sees her blink, her eyes widening when Will looks, deliberately, back at Dillon. "I'm surprised your family hasn't heard of it."

He releases Elijah's hand, pretending to focus on his food.

Dillon's smile is strained. "I might have heard about it on the news," he says, too-lightly.

"Mm." Will slices off another bite of turkey, chews it slowly, swallows loud. "I certainly don't want to scare anyone, but it's been happening so often…" He meets Dillon's eyes again. "You'd best be on your guard. I'd hate to think of anything happening to you."

Dillon's eyes narrow. "I don't think I have to worry about that," he says tightly. "If an Alpha can't protect his family, that's on him."

Will smiles. "And do you think your father can protect your family?"

"Can you?" Dillon snaps, upper lip curling back.

Will's smile widens. *Oh, kid, you have no fucking idea what I can do.* Before he can reply, the doorbell rings. Will knows exactly who it is, and he sighs, wiping his mouth with his napkin and getting to his feet before Elijah or Molly can.

"That must be him now," he says, and Dillon's eyes flash. Will circles the table, and touches Molly's shoulder. "Sweetheart, why don't you come with me? He told me he had a lot of case files and will probably need help unloading the car."

Molly swallows, still clearly confused, but she stands and follows Will into the kitchen.

"What the fuck is going on?" she hisses.

Will turns to her, grips her shoulders and meets her gaze steadily. "Do you have any weapons in the house?" he murmurs. "Guns, big-ass knives, anything?"

"I…" Molly swallows. "We have a gun in the safe upstairs. That's about it aside from the carving knife."

Will nods. "You know how to use it?" She shakes her head, and Will sighs. "Go get it anyway." She nods, and turns, practically fleeing up the stairs. Will breathes out, running a hand through his hair. It's unlikely that he'll be shot on sight – it doesn't fit the boys' pathology. It's a tentative, shaky, and altogether stupid assumption to make, but it's the only choice he has.

He goes to the door, and pretends to blink in surprise when he sees Jesse, C.J., Connor, and Alex standing on the stoop. They're all armed, holding guns loosely by their sides. Jesse smiles at him, and Christ, years must have passed harshly for him. He has the look of a boy – no, he's a man now, undoubtedly – who possesses the same fevered determination as a prophet from God.

Jesse lifts his pistol, and points it at Will. "Hey, Mister Foster," he greets brightly. "Nice to meet you. I'm Jesse. Can we come in?"

He's using his Omega Voice, and it prods insistently at the back of Will's head. If Will were an unmated Alpha, without a Voice of his own, he would undoubtedly yield to it. He pretends to, swallowing harshly and stepping to one side to let the boys in.

Once they're inside, it's Alex that turns and puts the muzzle of his gun against Will's back. "Let's get back to dinner!" Jesse says cheerily, leading the way to the dining room like he owns the place. Will allows them to herd him back in, watches Elijah's eyes widen and Wally's head snap up.

"Uh…" He clears his throat, for he clearly recognizes the little pack. "Hey, guys."

"Hey, Wally," Jesse purrs, and goes to him, rubbing a hand over his shoulder and nuzzling his hair. Wally's eyes are on the gun, and Alex insistently pushes his own weapon into Will's back, forcing him around the table and back to his place. He pulls Will's chair out, and Will sits.

"Where's your mom?" Connor asks, taking his place behind Elijah.

Wally looks at him with wide eyes. "I don't know."

"I heard her go up the stairs," Dillon hisses, his eyes narrowed and sharp on Will.

Jesse nods, lips pursing, and looks to C.J. "Go get her," he commands, and C.J. dips his head in deference, a small tremor running through his shoulders as Jesse's Omega voice settles in his skull. Will winces for him – back in the old days, Voices were an evolutionary necessity, to keep control over one's pack and give one the ability to calm another packmate down when they were behaving in a way that could damage themselves or others. Now, it's more a

gesture of trust, granting absolute power over a person, and receiving it in turn. Using it in excess, and so aggressively, can do more harm than good.

Will clears his throat, settles his hands on either side of his plate as Alex's gun finds a space for itself against the base of his skull. He could probably move fast enough to disarm Alex, but there's Jesse, Connor, and Dillon to consider too. C.J., upstairs – he can't hear the other Omega moving around, nor can he hear Molly. Maybe she chose to hide.

He tries to think of how many minutes have passed. Hannibal can't be more than fifteen away.

Jesse lifts his eyes, and looks at Will. He smiles, and leans down to nuzzle Wally's hair again, a soft purr falling from him that makes Will shiver and lift his chin. "Hey, Wally," he murmurs. "Do you wanna play 'Hide and Seek'?"

"Don't leave the table," Will commands before Wally can answer.

Jesse snarls, straightening. "You don't get a say in what happens," he hisses. "You're not in charge."

"Jesse," Will says, placating and low, "I want you to think real hard about what you're doing here."

"He said he has a friend on the way," Dillon warns. "Some guy called 'John'. Works with the FBI. Knows about our case."

"We'll be long gone before he shows up," Jesse promises, unafraid. "And if not, we'll kill him too."

Will lifts his chin. Sighs through his nose. He hears, above their heads, a shout and a scuffle, and tenses when a gunshot goes off.

Jesse's head snaps up, his eyes narrow, and he looks at Dillon since he's the only one not actively guarding a person. "Go figure out what that was," he demands, and Dillon nods, pushing himself to his feet and prowling out of the dining room.

Will swallows, as behind him, Alex hisses and grabs his shoulder tightly. "Let's just finish this and take him," he demands, and Will goes tense, growling at the thought of dying by a Goddamn *bullet*, of all things. How pedestrian. That thought sounds like Hannibal in his head.

"No," Jesse replies sharply, his eyes flashing gold. "No," he says again, more gently this time, and leans down. Wally's eyes are wide and teary now, staring helplessly at Will. Will wishes he could soothe him, that he could say something, could reassure this scared little boy the same way Shadow Man calmed him when he had nightmares.

Wishes he could say; 'Don't worry, one day you'll be big and strong, and this won't happen to you ever again'.

He can't see the door, but he hears the very, *very* soft click as it opens. Hears the *whoosh* of air, and smells Hannibal in the air. It is not the normal, gentle scent he's used to, not salted caramel and paper and wine, but something black with rage; woodsmoke and vinegar and altogether far too sweet like molasses. Still, he breathes it in greedily. His back is to the door, still, so he cannot see what Hannibal is doing, but it's only a matter of time before Jesse notices him there.

"Wally," he murmurs, and the boy's eyes snap to his. "Close your eyes."

Wally shivers, and obeys, and Will grabs the large carving knife sitting on the edge of the roasting tray, turns and slices through Connor's neck with a snarl. Alex lets out a yell of alarm, but it's cut entirely too short, and he hears a hard *snap*, and feels the kid's body sagging against his back. Blood arcs out over Elijah's head and he shudders, altogether too frozen to otherwise react.

Will shrugs Alex off him, and feels Hannibal's touch at his back.

"Upstairs," he says.

Jesse snarls in outrage, eyes flashing, and raises his gun.

"*No*," Will hisses, using his own Voice, and Jesse freezes, his eyes wide, blinking rapid-fire as Will's command takes hold of him. Jesse might have a Voice of his own, but Will is older, and his power comes from an Alpha's blood, and Jesse is too young and too fresh to resist it entirely. "Lower your weapon. Right now."

Jesse's hand shakes, he's glaring at Will openly, but he obeys. Will keeps his eyes on him, aware only of Hannibal's shadow as he prowls around the table and towards the stairs. He hasn't heard another gunshot, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything one way or the other.

Will lifts his chin, and gives Jesse a smile that is in no way kind, or warm.

He nods to Dillon's empty seat. "Sit."

Jesse obeys, collapsing into the chair like a puppet with the strings cut. He's breathing heavily, eyes shining gold, and unresistant as Will comes to him and removes his gun from his hand, placing it deliberately away from him.

"You're -. You're not -." Jesse looks up at him, panting. "You're not supposed to have a Voice."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Will replies. He looks up as Hannibal returns. There's not a speck of blood on him, his hair perfectly slicked back, only a light flush on his cheeks to betray any kind of exertion. That, and his eyes, which are a blistering red. Will's head tilts.

"She's shaken, but fine," Hannibal tells him. He wipes his hands almost absently on his coat. "The boy, less so."

"Still alive?"

"Mm." Hannibal lifts his shoulders in a shrug. "I wasn't sure what you wanted to do with him, so I removed the threat, but yes, he's still alive." He smiles, and Will hears the 'For now', loud and clear.

Molly rushes in, gasping and clutching at her throat, her eyes wide and face stained with tears as she seeks out her son, and her mother. She rushes to Wally and pulls him upright, clutching him to her chest as he sobs and clings to her, and then they both go to Elijah, holding him much more gingerly, mindful of the blood, but just as desperate.

Will presses his lips together, sighing. Perhaps certain families just attract killers – it is almost insulting, that he worked so hard to help them heal from John's tragic murder, only to bring another right to their doorstep. Though, truthfully, he cannot think of any possible connection between himself and Jesse – it's not like Jesse knew he was working on the case.

His head tilts, and he eyes the Omega, who is staring at Hannibal as if he's seen the Devil himself. Will wraps a hand in his hair, hauling him to his feet, and gestures at the mess.

"Would you mind?" he asks, and Hannibal smiles, and gives a gracious nod. He looks to the terrified family, pressing his lips together. Hannibal will be much better at soothing them than Will ever could be. Will jerks Jesse close to him, herding him towards the front door. "You're coming with me."

Jesse winces, whines, tries all kinds of sounds to placate Will and tug at his instincts as an Alpha, but all he manages to do is remind Will that, yes, this *isn't* his family, Jesse didn't threaten any people he had a mated or familial bond with, but Jesse certainly threatened *a* family, one he's been close to since he was a kid, and as an Alpha every instinct in him roars at the threat, wants to bite and claw and tear this little *boy* to pieces.

He throws Jesse onto the ground on the porch, shoves him onto his back and crouches down, his knee on Jesse's thin chest and his hand going tight and assured around his throat. He's choked a man to death before, ones much larger and more powerful than this boy. The tendons and muscles in his neck flex, warm and weak. His bones and vocal cords feel so brittle.

Will arches a brow as Jesse gasps, looks up at him with glowing golden eyes. He smiles. "I'm not gonna lie, Jesse, there's a very good chance I'll kill you after this," he murmurs. Jesse swallows. "But before I do, I'd like to know why you picked this family. Why you picked any of them."

Jesse swallows, gasps as Will gives his fragile throat a warning squeeze. "Weak Alphas," he rasps. "Doesn't deserve them."

Will hums. "I never knew my father," he tells the boy. "Only had my mother. Never said a bad word about him, but part of me knew he was…like that. Weak. Easily seduced by a pretty smile and a sweet scent." His head tilts again. "Even my uncle. He was strong, I knew he was strong, but he's all skin and bone now. I could just…" He squeezes again, and Jesse arches, clawing at his wrist, and lets out a pitiful whine. The night is dark, now, and Will knows no one will hear him. No one will see. "Well, I could just break him in two, easy as anything."

"Please," Jesse whispers. "Please. Just let me go."

Will laughs – it's cruel. "Now why would I do that?" he purrs, and Jesse's eyes flash and widen with terror. "You wanted a strong Alpha. Well, you managed to find one. Two, even. Lucky you."

Jesse whines, parts his lips and tries to turn his head, showing Will more of his throat. As if that will appease him – perhaps it might. If Will were a weaker man. Will snarls, hating the sight of it, hating that this *boy* would try and offer his neck and probably a lot more if he thought he could escape with his life. Shadow Man would never tolerate such a thing.

As though summoned by his thoughts, he hears the door open, and lifts his head so see Hannibal's shadow prowl through it. He smiles, and purrs openly, overjoyed at seeing his mate. Hannibal comes to him, crouching down beside him, and kisses Will's cheek as Jesse whimpers and writhes under his weight.

Hannibal cups his neck, two fingers flat to feel his pulse, and smiles when he finds it steady. "How are they?" Will asks.

Hannibal sighs, nudging Will's hair from his face with his nose. "Terribly shaken," he murmurs, and Will swallows back another outraged snarl. "I managed to glean that Molly shot the first boy that was up there. She seems to be going into shock in the aftermath of taking a life."

Will hums, and looks at Jesse again. "It's not for everyone."

Hannibal laughs.

"How do you want to play this?"

"Well…" Hannibal's hand brushes between his shoulders, down his back. Will wants to arch into it, purr like a needy housecat, turn his nose and breathe in deeply the scent of his mate. Clinging remnants of anger are soaked into Hannibal's skin, but now he is calming, deeming the immediate threat to Will over, and the salted caramel is returning. As well as that, a thick swell of pride and triumph, an aftertaste of whiskey glaze.

"We will need to call the police," Hannibal says, soft with aggravation over admitting it. Will nods. "I think it would be wise to call Jack, and let him know that this pack of wayward boys was dealt with." He nods again. "But perhaps…it is not impossible to believe that one of the boys fled, never to be seen again."

Will presses his lips together. "No," he murmurs. "I want this finished. For me *and* Jack."

Hannibal's smile holds teeth, and he kisses Will's cheek again. "Then, my daydreamer, you must finish it now. While we can still reasonably argue self-defense."

Will smiles, meeting Jesse's terrified eyes. He takes one of Hannibal's hands, flattens his free one over it, and fits it to the other side of Jesse's neck. "You're right," he breathes, and Hannibal's hand tightens as his does. Jesse gasps, clawing at them both frantically – defensive

wounds, good, that'll help sell the story. Will squeezes until he feels blood vessels burst. Until Jesse's eyes turn red at the edges and his cheeks go purple, his lips blue. Until his gasping turns to panting, turns to a single, solitary, weak whine. Escapes him completely, and his body goes lax.

Hannibal kisses beneath Will's ear. "Keep the pressure up," he coaxes, flattening his hand against Will's, so that Will is covering one of his own, and Hannibal's in mimic, both of them joined as they take the life of this pitiful, awful creature borne of blood and misguided instinct. Will sees the precise moment the light in Jesse's eyes leaves him completely, and he sags over him with a shuddering exhale, and releases his neck.

Hannibal moves, brushes a hand through Will's hair, and turns him so that he can kiss Will – it's chaste, but lingers, warming Will all the way down his spine.

"Very good, my daydreamer," he murmurs, and his smile is wide and satisfied, his voice thick with pride. "Very good."

Will and Hannibal carry the body back inside, piling them all in the dining room, since that is where most of the evidence is. He screws with it just enough that it will suit his story, carries C.J. and Dillon's bodies down too and notes that Hannibal has busied himself with cleaning the blood from Molly's bedroom.

The family sit in the living room, under blankets and holding cups of coffee. Elijah has showered, and Will sits in front of them, waiting until they all meet his eyes.

"I'll do all the talking," he promises. "You just have to agree with me."

Molly swallows, her eyes bright with tears. "You knew who he was," she says. Not accusing, but soft with understanding. "From the beginning."

Will nods. "I'd been working with the FBI, following this case for some time. I recognized Dillon, prepared for what was coming." He swallows, breathes out, laces his fingers together. Hannibal is by the door, watching for the telltale glow of red and blue flashing lights. "I'm sorry I couldn't warn you properly. I'm sorry this happened to you. But you're alive. You survived."

Molly nods, and takes a long, long drink of her coffee, as sirens wail and the night sky colors with police car lights. "I think," she says, slowly, "we could all do with a very, very long vacation."

Will smiles.

Jack buys his story, because there's no reason why he wouldn't. Will spins a tale for him of gold, telling him how Jesse targeted Wally because he was a lone pre-presenting Alpha, without a father in his life to guide him, and Jesse was compelled through his pathology to take him as he had the others. He didn't have time to kidnap Wally first, but figured it would be easier with just a mother and Omega grandmother present. He tells Jack that Will's and Hannibal's presence there was coincidence, because it was. He tells Jack that every wound on the boys was made in self-defense, because they were. Of course they were. Who would fault a pair of Alphas for defending their family?

Jack offers Elijah, Molly, and Wally a hotel room for the night, since the house is an active crime scene. Will offers his own house. They accept neither, simply pack up their truck and leave with their dog. Will doesn't ask where they go – when all's said and done, he doesn't particularly care. Just like with his uncle, their influence in his life was powerful in the beginning, and led him to Shadow Man, but he doesn't owe them anything anymore.

By the time they make it back to Will's house, it is very late, late enough to almost be called early the next day. Will is exhausted, but accepts Hannibal's kiss, his touch, eagerly. He lets Hannibal press him to the wall and lets him bite, claw, snarl against Will's neck. He lets Hannibal turn him and mount him by the fire, spit-slick and raw, and Hannibal's hands shake when he touches Will, covering Will's hands and making them lace together as if trying to recreate when they'd choked the life out of Jesse. Will comes when Hannibal's teeth find his neck and his knot locks, spilling deep into Will, calling him 'Beautiful' and 'Daydreamer' and 'Mine, all mine'.

The next day, Will puts his house up for sale.

He'll admit, he didn't expect Alana to catch on so quickly, so he's not quite prepared for the outraged shriek of 'William Shannon Graham!' that greets him when he answers the phone. He winces, clearing his throat, and meets Hannibal's amused gaze over their breakfast of pastries and coffee.

"Alana Elizabeth Verger-Bloom," he replies, settling deeper into his chair. "You better have a good reason for middle-naming me."

"Don't you take that tone with me! I'm pissed at you," she says, and Will sighs, lifting his eyes to the ceiling. God save him from the love of bullheaded women. "First of all, I have to hear about the fact that you almost *died*, from *Jack* of all people, and then I hear that you sold your house and you and Hannibal fucking eloped to Europe!"

Will huffs, smiling despite himself. "Technically we didn't elope," he replies. Hannibal laughs, and takes a drink of his coffee, his eyes warm and shining with affection. "We're not married yet. I wasn't gonna do it without you there, I'm not suicidal."

"The jury's still out on that," Alana warns. Her tone has gentled, somewhat. *Somewhat*. "Where are you guys, then?"

"Right now, Italy," Will replies. And it's been wonderful; the cooler weather makes the mornings glisten with frost, glittering in the grass and darkening the clouds to a silver as they linger over the city of Florence, but during the day it is still warm enough to be comfortable. Hannibal has spent most of them leading Will through this beloved city of his, showing Will the beautiful golden halls, the impressive architecture. And the nights, well, the nights are just as amazing; he and Hannibal pressed together in soft sheets and darkness, moving as one like the beasts they are. "I think France is next."

Hannibal nods, still smiling.

"Oh," Alana murmurs. She's lost a lot of her momentum now, and Will imagines her sitting and staring at her lap, blinking and trying to figure out if she should be angry or happy. "Well, when *is* the wedding, then?"

"I don't know," Will says, laughing, and turns to meet Hannibal's eyes. "When are you gonna make an honest man out of me, hmm?"

Hannibal grins at him. "Name the time and the place, darling. I would happily marry you right now."

Will smiles. "Alana wants to be there, of course."

Hannibal's eyes flash, darken. "Of course," he purrs. "Then I suggest she buy a plane ticket quickly. I don't think I could bear another day without calling you my husband."

Over the phone, Alana makes a dramatic gagging sound. "You two are so cute, you're killing me," she complains, but she's smiling now; Will can hear it. "Alright, tell me what airport to fly to and I'll be there faster than you can blink."

Will smiles. "We're in Florence, so whatever's nearest that," he tells her. "Better hurry. I think Hannibal is calling a priest as we speak."

Alana huffs. "Alright. See you guys soon!"

She hangs up, and Hannibal's brows rise, his smile still warm and soft with affection. "As it happens," he says lightly, "I am quite acquainted with a number of the clergy in this city. Some of whom are progressive enough to marry two Alphas."

Will smiles, lashes going low. He sets his phone down and braces his elbows on the table, lacing his fingers together and setting his chin in them. Hannibal's eyes drop to his hands – he has developed a fervent fascination with them, Will noticed, since their shared kill. Will lifts his thumb, petting along the corner of his mouth, and Hannibal's eyes darken further.

"Would you want to wear white?" he murmurs, teasing. "Or should I?"

Hannibal wets his lips. "No," he says, and lifts his eyes, meeting Will's. "I must insist you wear red."

Will hums. "You should wear black," he replies. "Or gold. Or both."

Hannibal smiles, and sets his drink down, standing and prowling around the table until he is near Will. He leans down, cupping Will's neck, and lifts him into a kiss. This one is most definitely not chaste in the slightest, leaves Will panting, his head warm with fog and his heart seizing with want.

"Whatever you desire, my darling, beautiful Will," he purrs, and touches Will's chin. Takes his hand, and laces their fingers together, the rings they're wearing nudging each other with a soft sound. "Come with me," he murmurs, and pulls Will to his feet, coffee and pastries and phones forgotten.

Will breathes out shakily, thrumming with anticipation as Hannibal leads him back to their bedroom. He grins, brazen and breathless in the wake of Hannibal's desire, the love for Will he holds in his eyes, in the touch of his lips to Will's neck, the way his hands splay out wide and warm on Will's flanks, drawing him closer.

Will closes his eyes, nuzzles the newest bite mark bruising Hannibal's throat, and whispers; "I love you, Shadow Man."

Hannibal shivers, and growls, and kisses him with teeth. "And I adore you, my daydreamer," he replies, low and soft and so sweet with desire, with love. He pulls Will to him, kisses him until Will is breathless, and guides him to the bed. "Let me show you just how much."

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sad this is over, I'm fragile. But I hope you guys liked it! Thank you for indulging me <3

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